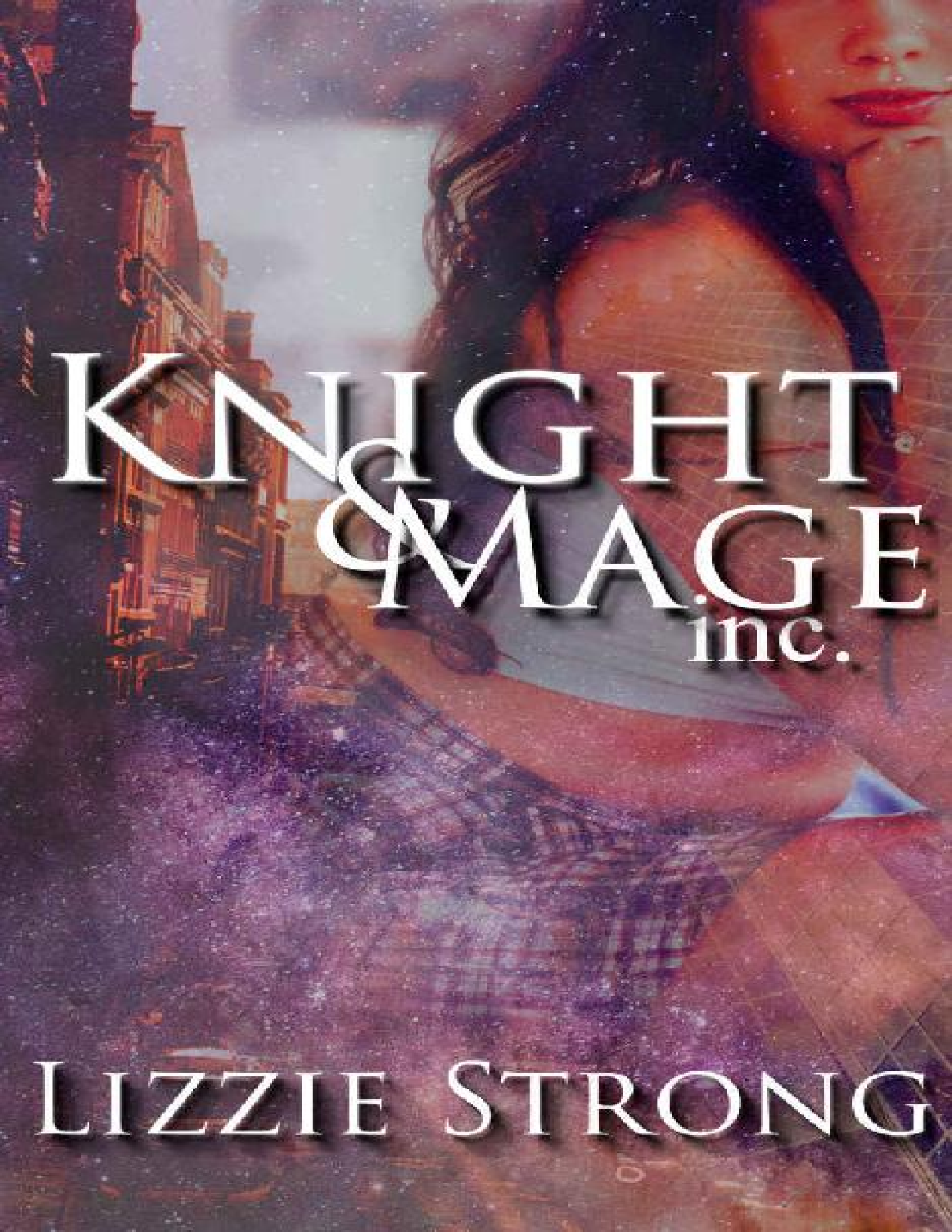




KNIGHT & IMAGE inc.

LIZZIE STRONG

Knight&Mage inc.

Lizzie Strong

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To my Dungeons and Dragons sapphics who took one look at a big, tall Goliath woman and said "I'd climb that like a tree." You're welcome. <3

Foreword

For all Content warnings, tags (that may or may not be appropriate/formal enough for marketing), and more, check out [my author site here.](#)

Check the back of the book for more links.

Love,
Lizzie

“Do both of you understand why I called you down here?”

Ash Cartier folded her long fingers over a stack of files. Her oak desk was cleared of all its usual clutter, only a beige box loitering near the fat folders. Ash sat forward, brushing her arms over the top of them. Her blazer blocked out the names: Odette Plum and Xena Battlemoar.

“Yes.” Odette Plum beamed despite how she wrung her hands in her lap. The ruby crystals dangling from her ears glowed with a dull, magical hum. The department head of Magical Development pulled on her perfected, customer service smile.

“Please, save us the pain and drama and rip the band-aid off.” Xena Battlemoar rolled her amber eyes. She cracked her muscular shoulders with a flick of her arms out in front of her. A malicious smirk grew on her lips at the shiver that rolled through Odette’s frame. The department head of Knight development slouched back in her seat.

Flopping one leg over the other, Xena knocked her heavy combat boots into Odette’s right leg. Odette shoved it with her knuckles. The goliath woman snickered. Odette settled further back in her seat, tucking her legs away from her. Xena pushed toward her with a growing smirk. The Fae woman drew a spell circle into her palm. She slapped it to the intruding boot. Subtly, of course. Shooting the invading leg to the right, it landed into the armrest. Not so subtly.

“Ladies, I can tell you’re both eager to take this role, but the policy is policy. I am here to let you both know it has been decided and in the tradition of passing on the torch, you both will receive letters tonight at six. Expect it to be a company-issued hawk. And I will see the victor tomorrow in this office and expect the loser to take it with grace and return to their department in the morning.” Ash tucked her flattened purple hair behind her ears and resituated the collar of her cloak in one smooth motion. The conduit, a purple crystal clasp on her cloak, illuminated under her chin. Shadows crawled over her face. Some were natural while other shadows were magical. Surrounded by a lilac, magical haze, Ash picked up the last box and tapped the rune engraved onto the side. The box hovered beside her. Ash clapped her hands together. “May the best department head win.”

Ash was the previous Vice-President of Knight&Mage Inc- The leading provider of quality defense and magic to the world. She slipped the files into her floating box and sent it off ahead of her. Files that held both Odette and Xena's futures in them. Collectively, the two women had a filing cabinet of work experience at Knight&Mage Inc. The company was a multi-million-dollar empire that had recently lost its President. A tragedy left Henrick Daughtry comatose to never rise again. Unfortunately, a man like Henrick only cared about the numbers and success. He did not have someone come to his rescue. As is the life of corporate management, one either is beloved by most or hated by all. Which led to Odette and Xena, sitting in Ash's empty office. Ash, immediately, took up the mantle of President before the ink dried on Henrick's medical record. This left the position of Vice President vacant and available. A position they dove for, metaphorically and literally.

Odette and Xena locked eyes as Ash sauntered out of the office into the hall. A corner office with only windows facing out to the vast city of Kings Fall. The new city was built on the ruins of dragon's fire. Skyscrapers mixed with massive stone towers with orbs on top. Knight&Mage Inc. was the first skyscraper to be built in Kings Fall and was still considered the tallest. Their building loomed over the city at sunset. King's fall could be described as flat and rocky, thanks to being burnt to a crisp originally. Outside of the city grew thick, luscious forests full of magic and life. The magic that filled K&M, however, was crafted in the thick, castle-style walls. Their monument to history with a whimsical design with an endless middle tower. The further up one went, the less physical security and more magical defense it became. The president's office sat a floor below the CEO's surrounded by glass and clouds.

The Vice President's office, however, was the perfect mix of physical and magical security. Panes enchanted with reflective magic, interior walls with hand scanners, and I.D. badges and knights as security to walk the halls. Odette's department had been the ones to craft the enchanted glass that covered the office. Xena's department trained the security guards who patrolled the floor.

"Should we have dinner, then?" Xena raised her right brow in a challenge, thrusting herself out of the chair. Towering over Odette, Xena commanded respect throughout the building. Xena stood at six and a half feet tall without her boots. Long blond hair fell down her back. She often

braided her silky hair with poisoned spikes when she worked out in the field. The Goliath in her made her steel-colored skin contrast against the obsidian black lines of her tattoos. Broad shoulders, a bold nose, and burning amber eyes, she walked with the confidence of a woman who knew no one could outfight her. No one had ever gone into a fistfight with Xena and won. Built like a god and she knew it well. Always flexing off her shoulders and biceps when she could, her closet full of ill-fitted button-downs.

“Why would you ever ask me to dinner?” Odette snorted loudly as she bound to her feet. Her heels clicked against the wood flooring. Odette, however, stood at five foot five with her perpetually well-maintained heels. She enchanted everything she owned to stay perfect and pressed, no matter the circumstances. Her nails were all designed with runes for quick casting. Round face and button nose, wide, curvy hips she dressed up in skirts and stockings. She often left her wavy red hair down, pinned back with pearls or other magic crystals. Odette never flinched when Xena lunged and never backed down to her challenge. Because Odette might appear dainty... everyone knew who she was: the Headmaster of the Warlock Academy of deathcraft’s daughter.

“So that we’ll be together when we find out who got the position?” Xena crossed her arms under her chest. Her black button-down shifted around her, tightening around her shoulders and biceps as usual. Leaning forward, she flexed her muscles as an intimidation tactic. Odette neither flinched nor gave any indication it worked.

Odette’s baby blues stared up into her face with disdain. “If we’re in the same room, and you find out you lost, you’ll throw a hissy fit. One of which I do not intend to witness.” Odette pivoted on her heels, stalking away from the empty desk.

“So, when I win, you’ll graciously accept defeat?” Xena sneered.

“I’m always graceful.” Odette stopped in the doorway, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “But you can’t honestly think you got the position, do you?”

“My team always makes quota and I’ve been recommended just like you. But the difference is I have the guts to run this company.” Xena sat on the edge of the desk, her pointer finger stabbing into the oak. “Admit it, shortstop, I’m just more impressive.”

“You’re more something. Impressive isn’t it. How about pigheaded, stubborn, risky, and emotional. You’re not a logical, reasonable leader and that’s who they need in that seat. Why don’t you admit that you’re just a big gym sock who wears too much eyeliner?” Odette twisted in the doorway to lean on the frame. “Don’t dent my desk with your ‘*impressive*’ physique.” She used her fingers to accentuate the word before disappearing into the hall where Ash already left.

“It is impressive! Thank you for noticing!” Xena bellowed after Odette with a cackle.

“I was being sarcastic!” Odette’s voice bounced on the walls.

Xena walked out of the office. Closing it behind her, the click echoed through the hall. Everyone had already gone home for the day. The department floors below were hollow and eerily cast in shadows. As Xena strolled to the elevator, she scanned for any stragglers. The workforce floor for development was designed like a labyrinth of offices and open space. She flashed her badge next to the elevator and listened for the ding over her head. Odette already stood at the base level.

They both believed one of them would come in the next day with a broken heart and crushed dreams. Here at Knight&Mage, not only do we accomplish the impossible, but we dabble in the mystical. Because where else could a knight and a mage not kill each other long enough... to fall in love?



Chapter One:

“Let me get this straight, you’re going to get a letter at six if you got the position or not?” Minx, the barkeep, and Xena’s best friend asked from under the bar of Mumford’s. The longest-lasting bar in all of King’s Fall. Enchanted with fireproof magic and paid a fair price for physical security every night. Not to mention Xena spent most nights at the bar eating wings and talking shop.

Most of her best hires she found wandering into the bar late at night. People want to believe that a knight should be raised from childhood and study to be a knight. Xena knew better. Any person who lived a life where they had to fight tended to be a better base than anything else. She could teach someone to swing a sword. She couldn’t teach resilience. The hard-to-kill ones are the kind of people she found in the booths at Mumford’s. Drinking cheap beer with black eyes, the born and bred survivors.

“Yeah, so I’m sorry in advance if a hawk comes screaming in here. Company birds are a bit dramatic if I’m being honest.” Xena clinked her beer bottle against the one Minx held up.

He sported a gray beard and mustache. Other than his faded tattoos and war scars, Minx was distinguishable by the tiger stripes across his face and long pointy ears. Other than that, Minx looked like every other Katto (Cat Folk). Big, feline, built like a lion, big paws, skinny tail, and now that he was older, a beer gut. But Minx hid it well behind a large apron and thick leather belt full of *tools*.

“Can I eat it?” Minx teased. He received a smack across the tops of his ears for it. Minx cackled as he avoided a second smack of Xena’s hands. “Joking, mostly. Anyway, why couldn’t they just tell you in the office?”

“It’s tradition. You see, they can’t go out and say it, but the tradition of fighting for the position is literal. They narrow it down to two candidates, they send out the letters at the same time. And if the loser thinks they can, sometimes they go out and actually fight for the position. K&M is kinda old school but won’t outright say it like that. That’s why it’s so cryptid and ominous.” Xena shrugged as she threw back the rest of her beer. It clinked against the counter seconds before Minx swiped it and replaced it with a full, frosty one. Hot wings were dropped in a bright yellow basket from the

kitchen that magically floated over their heads. Her wings steamed and were drenched in plenty of sauce.

Minx took one wing as payment as Xena tied a napkin around her neck and dug in.

“So, is that why you’re so *jazzed* about tonight? You think you and Odette are going to fight?” Minx licked his chops slowly to collect every drop of sauce.

“Hell yeah, I do! I can’t wait. I want to beat that smug smirk off her face and toss her into the river. Like the good old days, no more office politics and petty pranks. Full-on fist fight!” Xena slammed her knuckles into the countertop. Every glass atop of the bar rattled, but most of the patrons didn’t flinch. They all continued their conversations and drinks without so much as looking at Xena.

The bar was packed and yet Xena sat at the bar and took up Minx’s time. Due in part to Minx’s three other brothers working behind the bar, conversing with their regulars.

“Why haven’t you fought her already? You fight everyone,” Minx snorted, taking up his beer and twirling it. After a few swirls, he tossed it back. Once empty, he lobbed the bottle over his head into the recycling bin behind the bar.

A small bell above their heads chimed. Glitter wafted in the air as a purple-winged, Fae employee dropped from the rafters. They fluttered to the chalkboard above the bar and drew another line under Minx’s name. All three brothers and the one human named Fred, who worked at the bar, were in competition. Didn’t matter what, they were always competing for something. This week it was aiming.

“I know! And it’s been driving me nuts! Little miss perfect bubble and magic just waltzes around the office like she knows best. Just because she has magic doesn’t mean I can’t beat her at everything. We’ve been enemies since we both got department head at the same time, and this will be the first time I’m able to pop that ego of hers.” Xena dried her face with the napkin. She stuffed it into the basket with the picked clean bones. The basket began to float over her head and back into the kitchen rafters. Xena watched it for a moment with disdain.

“Is it because you’re rivals or is it because she’s got magic and you don’t?” Minx prodded with a poke of his dull nail.

“I’m a knight, I eat mages for breakfast. Knight, mage, doesn’t matter. I win. I always win.” Xena snapped her attention back to Minx.

“Then why are you worried?” Minx brimmed from ear to ear.

“I’m not worried. Pfft. You’re worried.” Xena snatched up her new beer and took a long swig. If she were being honest, she was a *little* worried.

If Odette took up the position, she would never hear the end of it. She might lose her job when she bound across the table to throttle her new boss. She could never, and she meant ever, work for Odette. *Little miss perfect deathcraft or whatever she was called.* Xena didn’t have a cushy desk job like Odette. Knight development was about physical prowess, knowing strategy, and being cunning.

“So then let me ask this- if you’re going to win, do you think she’ll come after you?” Minx pulled out glasses to mix different orders that flew in on levitating papers.

“Of course, she can’t let me win!” Xena’s eyes snapped to her watch. Time bearing down on her, her lungs tightened. The notch on her watch flipped to six. Her alarm went off. “Here we go.”

And as if summoned by the mere thought- a hawk the size of a hunting dog flew through the open bar doors. Nearly scalping half the bar patrons, it screamed into the air. Everything in the bar went quiet. A large scroll of parchment flopped into her waiting hands. Xena vibrated with excitement. She furiously opened it without waiting for the hawk to leave. It perched on the bar and snatched up a mouthful of the peanuts in bowls lingering nearby. Xena unfurled the letter with a wide grin.

“Well?” Minx swatted away the bird.

“You better batten down the hatches, Minx. Cause I got the job!” The bar erupted in applause. The hawk soared away. Xena showed all the newly attentive bar patrons the ‘you have been selected’ parchment in her hands. Minx poured out shots for the bar.



“Slow down, Odette, you’re telling me that they didn’t just give you the position in the office?” Clara whined from the kitchen counter. Odette’s fiancé dangled her legs over the side of the counter and kicked

them into the air. Unlike Odette's perfectly pressed, office-worthy clothes, Clara wore nothing but jean shorts and a low-cut silk top. Clara kept her pixie cut decorated with floral clips and tiny jewels, matching the large rock on her finger. Fiddling with the engagement ring, Clara watched while Odette worked over the stove. She stirred the pot as the garlic bread baked in the oven.

"No, it's tradition. Like I was saying before your mother called, they're hoping it will lead to a public fight they can claim and have as publicity, so we need to eat early for when Xena shows up to fight me." Odette pulled the plates from the cupboard to the table. She motioned for Clara to get down.

"Why do you pick up?" Clara mumbled to herself as Odette moved to pull out the bread from the oven.

"Your mother is soon to be my mother-in-law, being cordial is kind of expected," Odette greeted the blast of warm air to her face with a smile. Butter and garlic filled her nostrils. Odette stuffed her hands into oven mitts.

"But not really, she's just trying to get you to talk about me, behind my back, like she always does," Clara scowled.

"She only asks about you because you won't call her back or pick up." Odette flicked an eyebrow upon her forehead.

"Yeah, whatever. So, Xena, and this fight? You won't just give it to her even if she's willing to fight you for it?" Clara flopped into her seat and kicked her feet up onto the table. She never even wanted to contemplate her mother's presence unless it led to her getting something out of it. Obviously, she wouldn't get anything out of her mother asking about their weekend plans.

Odette placed the steaming bread on the tabletop and pushed Clara's feet off in the same movement. As Odette carved the bread, Clara snatched up a piece. Odette offered her a napkin. Clara picked at the inside of the bread, leaving the crust on her plate. Clara was the same height as Odette. Most half-elf or half-Fae folks were of the shorter stature with "cuter" features when compared to regular humans. Clara always looked like a porcelain doll. Odette did her best to contradict the cutesy façade of being part Fae. It helped that she didn't inherit her mother's wings. But she did inherit her curvy, wide hips.

“No, because I’ve wanted this job for two years. And I won’t give it to some brute just because she swings a big sword.” Rushing back to the kitchen, Odette pulled the pan off the stove. She returned to the table, scooping out dinner for both.

Clara picked around the vegetables as Odette put all the pans away. Then she sat down. Odette watched her fiancé finish picking what she wanted to eat and then get up. Clara put her plate down for Rufus, Odette’s hellhound. She didn’t even wait for it to cool down before walking to the couch across the living space. Odette sighed to herself as she took up a piece of bread. Rufus licked the plate clean. Hellhounds were massive, as he was closer to the size of a bear than a dog. Odette always described him as a massive German Shepherd whose hair was always on fire. He picked up the plate in his mouth like a frisbee. She pet him down his flaming back. Rufus trotted himself into the kitchen and spat the plate into the sink. He shook out his flaming locks in the kitchen before licking his paws clean of the sauce.

“Why not?” Clara whined, snatching up Odette’s attention again. Clara picked at her jeans while she tried to find a channel to watch on their television. She glanced up from her jeans to ensure Odette was staring at her.

Rufus clambered up into Clara’s empty chair. Odette spared her hellhound a motherly look of disdain. He hung his head but stared up at her with puppy eyes. She pulled his frisbee off from a side table and set it in front of him. Then Odette passed him a piece of her meat while she finished cleaning up her plate. Rufus licked Clara’s crumb-covered spot and ate the scraps he was given.

“Whoa, what do you mean, why not?” Odette wheeled to stare at Clara.

“Well since you’ve become a department head you haven’t had time at home.” Clara flopped onto the side of the couch. “So, if you get VP then you’ll never have time for me.”

“Excuse me, but I’m here plenty.” Odette rose from her seat. “It’s not my fault that you’re always out with friends or partying.”

“You said you wouldn’t resent me for that.” Clara stared up from the couch.

“I don’t! But you can’t be mad with me for not spending time with you when you’re out with friends or out drinking.” Odette flopped her hands out to her side.

“I invite you to go! All! The! Time!” Clara flipped up onto her feet.

“I work all day, the last thing I want to do when I get home is to go out to a club or out shopping or out doing whatever your friends do. I do not mind if you do, because that makes you happy and that makes me happy for you to be happy. But don’t be mean to me just because we’re not the same. You knew that when you asked me out and when I asked you to marry me. We’ve been over this a thousand times, Clara. I’m not an outgoing person. I’m a home body and my body likes to be home.” Odette ran her hands through her hair. Closing her eyes, she tried to count to ten in her head. How many times had they had this argument? She was not likely to change soon. Odette ruffled out her thick hair with her fingers. When she opened her eyes, Clara stared at her with wide doe eyes. “What?”

“Sorry for not having a big important job like you,” Clara sneered. Pinching her heart-shaped face up with disgust, Clara cocked a hip out to the side.

“That is not at all what I was saying.” Odette pinched the bridge of her nose. Fury warmed her bones as she tried to control herself. It had been a long day and she did not want to pick a fight. The fight with Xena loomed over her head. She would need all her magic and energy as Xena would not go down. It would not be easy if Xena decided ‘it was war’.

“It is! Because you work at this big company while I’m just some department store wench.” Clara tossed the remote for the television across the room. Rufus tossed himself out of the seat to catch the remote. His flaming tail wagging, he trotted up to Odette’s side. Clara scoffed as she snatched it out of his mouth. “Oh wow, just make me look stupid, Rufus! Real mature!”

“One, watch it, he’s a dog, he does dog things. He knows to catch.” Odette smacked the remote out of Clara’s hand onto the couch. “And two, you’re not going to mix my words up. I don’t care where you work. I told you when I signed the lease that you could work whatever you wanted, even if it didn’t make a lot because I knew you were trying. How did this become me being the villain here?”

“So, you think I’m the villain?” Clara’s eyes teared up immediately.

“No! I don’t! What are we arguing over? I’m so confused,” Odette whimpered, her hands clenched together at her waist.

“Of course, you’re confused because you’re not smart enough to realize a problem when it’s right *fucking* in front of you. For someone who’s supposed to be some grand sorceress prodigy, you really are dense. You don’t love me and you’re trying to manipulate me into thinking that’s okay. That I should settle for some stupid, insensitive, overcompensating perfectionist. It’s not and I’m not taking your bullshit anymore. If that job is so important, why don’t you marry that? At least it cares what you think.” Clara shoved Odette by the shoulders.

Odette fell silent as Clara stormed around her and Rufus. The bedroom door slammed shut behind her, further into her one-bedroom apartment. A wide and spacious area for relaxing. Odette filled it with comfort. The couch was squishy. The dining room chairs were designed for back support. Even the queen size bed was an oasis. Always filled with light from the large French doors and massive moon window, the apartment felt warm. Yet, as Odette sank onto the arm of the couch, she felt so uncomfortable. Her soul floated away from her as if her body were stone and she was a ghost. Weightless and woozy, she stared down at Rufus. The words that flew out of Clara’s mouth repeated at maximum volume in her ears.

Rufus panted as he stared up at her with big, red eyes. They glowed with the flames behind them. His tongue let off steam as his attention drifted toward the back of the apartment. Odette glanced over her shoulder, “I don’t know buddy. I don’t know what happened.”

The chime for her watch rang from the kitchen. As if summoned by the bell, a company-issued hawk burst the balcony doors open. Odette hadn’t locked them, anticipating this. Yet as the hawk dropped a scroll into her hands, she didn’t want to look. For a moment she wondered if she even wanted it now. Her chest weighed heavier with every passing breath. They had fought before, but nothing like that. As if Clara became a can of oil, waiting to light a match. *She exploded so rapidly!* Odette numbly unfurled the parchment before her.

The backroom opened with a strained creak. Odette stared at the paper lit up by Rufus’ fire. Soft footsteps followed the hollow sound of wind blowing in through the balcony doors. Odette peeked up with teary eyes as Clara glared down at her.

“What does it say?” Clara’s face pinched in rage.

“Clara, please. I didn’t mean whatever I did. I’m sorry.” Odette exhaled shakily, placing the paper down on the living room table.

“You got it, didn’t you? Because you always get what you want. And I get nothing.” Clara wrenched her poorly packed bag toward the door. It clacked against the floor as she stormed toward the front door.

“Clara, please,” Odette cried, stumbling after her.

Clara stopped at the door, wrenching it open. “I cheated on you too. But you were too stupid to notice. Too busy at your big, important job to see how lonely I was here, by myself.” Clara ripped the ring off her finger and tossed it toward the window.

Rufus leaped into the air and caught it. Odette chased Clara out into the hall beyond her apartment. She stopped at the stairs as she realized Clara wouldn’t stop. The whispers of her confession filled the stairwell. *She wasn’t coming back.* They had fought before, but she’d always kept the ring on her finger. Odette’s fingers twisted her own ring in maddening circles.

When Odette returned to the apartment, Clara’s ring dripped with hellhound saliva onto the parchment. It seemed to amplify the words ‘you’ve been selected’ in a far more sinister way. Sinking into her couch, her hellhound collapsed at her feet. Parchment in one hand and the engagement ring clutched in the other, Odette fell apart.

For a long time, she hoped Xena would come for her... because at least then she would feel anything other than hollow.

Chapter Two:

The morning came fast and without a massive fight. It even came with fresh coffee in the management break room, which was a huge deal. *No one ever wants to brew the coffee.* As Xena stepped into the break room on the trail of a heavenly cup of coffee, she stopped dead. Odette loitered across from the pot of coffee, leaning on the only table in the room. At first, Xena's instinct, to swagger inside and boast that she got the job, nearly took over. Until she recognized the foreign look on Odette's face. Red-eyed, lacking mascara, and not even a sliver of her daily maintenance. She nursed a mug of coffee, her forefinger rubbing against her ring finger. A naked ring finger.

Xena deflated. Her heart sank. *What a bitch.* Adding insult to injury, Odette didn't get the job then she loses her fiancé. Xena scowled, shuffling around the doorframe. She wanted coffee, especially fresh coffee. Xena pivoted and slid inside.

"Morning... *Nemesis.*" Xena poked her hands into her pockets and trotted awkwardly toward the pot.

"Morning," Odette exhaled, eyes distant. She raised the cup to her lips and drank slowly.

"Never pegged you for a coffee person. Doesn't have enough lizard tongue or newt toes." Xena poured herself a mug. Her usual mug, a cat wearing aviators, hung on the rack. She poured in sugar, her back to Odette. If she wanted to get a crack in, this was the time. Technically they both weren't on the clock. She could let her have that. *What a bad day.* Xena was merciless on the battlefield but she wasn't heartless. Tensed up at the shoulders, she prepared for a spell to smack her in the back. As the seconds ticked by, Xena melted and twisted back around. "Nothing? Really?"

"What? Sorry." Odette blinked her way back to life. As her eyes landed on Xena, they stayed the distant, emotionless pools of blue. Xena flinched inwardly as she hid behind her coffee cup. Sipping loudly, Xena watched Odette analyze her features. Usually, Odette filled out her blouses and skirts like a born professional. Today she seemed to drown in her own

skin, let alone her stiff clothing. No charms or enchantments, or even fairy dust around her. Odette seemed smaller today. Xena cocked a brow.

“I won’t add insult to injury.” Xena tapped her fingers against the mug. She sighed as she lowered her mug.

“Good, that’s beneath someone of your station and way beneath someone of mine.” Odette glared, finally life returned to her pearlescent blue eyes.

“Oh? You think you’re still above me?” Xena set her cup down.

“Well, I am your boss now.” Odette shrugged, sipping her coffee softly. Then she grimaced and set it down. “No, you’re right, the coffee is gross, but I needed something to jumpstart me.”

Xena froze. *Wait, one second.* Xena blinked back to life as she stepped forward, putting a finger in Odette’s face.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up. I think your girl hit you on the head on her way out because I’m the one who got the job.” Xena poked Odette firmly on the nose and shoved her into the table. Odette sputtered as she swatted Xena’s hand out of her face.

“Really childish of you, and you’re about to take a sensitivity training for that comment too you brutish barbarian.” Odette poked her forefinger into the center of Xena’s collarbone.

“I need sensitivity training? *Me?* You just called me a barbarian!” Xena shoved Odette back. Her heart raced as blood pumped through her veins. Every drop filling with excitement and adrenaline. *Finally, a fight!* Xena wished she had access to her weapon, but her broad sword sat cold in her work locker. Odette wasn’t equipped with her usual spell book or conduits either. A good old hand-to-hand fight. Xena smirked. “You really want to duke it out?”

“Why on earth would I *duke* it out with you. I got the job!” Odette pulled the parchment out from off the table.

Xena’s blood ran cold. She stared at an exact replica of the parchment that she received last night.

“Real cute, cut the charms, That’s a fake! Because I have the real one!” Xena pulled out the parchment from her back pocket and shoved it in Odette’s face. Both blinked widely as they examined the other’s acceptance letter. Their eyes met sharply for a moment and stayed glued to each other. The other’s letter gripped tightly in their hands. The Odette broke into a run across the breakroom. Xena scoffed, “Oh, real mature!”

Xena barreled after her as they ran across the main floor of Knight&Mage Inc. Odette danced around sleepy coworkers and loitering objects that floated everywhere. Xena bluntly shoved everything out of her way much like a bull in a porcelain shop. Both women hit the elevator at the same time. Blindly slapping for the president's floor, the doors to the elevator hissed shut. It jutted upward, knocking both into each other. Xena smacked Odette's hands. Odette shoved her. Elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, they pushed back and forth till the elevator dinged. Odette squeezed out first, a step ahead of Xena. She bounced out of Xena's grip as Xena lunged for her multiple times. They both came to a sputtering stop in front of Ash's new chambers.

Ash stood in the middle of a small crowd of shareholders, the CEO, and other board members. All of them looked up to the two panting women in the wide-open glass doorway. The assistant, Grecia Monroe, a wet elf who looked on the brink of tears, burst across the room toward them. Grecia shut the glass doors behind her. Everyone stared at Xena and Odette in shock and awe. But Odette and Xena glared at Grecia.

Grecia had all her hair pulled up into a slick ponytail. Her face and clothing dripped as her pointed ears flapped in the air beside them. Gills opened along her throat as Grecia gasped for air. Then she started a hushed, raspy tirade. "How dare both of you to come barging in here, how did you both get clearance for this area, this is such a--"

"Grecia shut up before you dry up." Xena snatched the files out of Grecia's hands.

"Xena, sensitivity training. Today!" Odette snapped.

"You're not my boss!" Xena returned the snap.

"Yes I am." Odette snatched the files from Xena and shoved them back into the assistant's hands. "Grecia, please, set her straight."

"Ha! No one has ever been able to make me straight," Xena snorted with a wide smirk. Odette smacked her bicep with all her strength. "Ow! Worker's comp."

"Shut. Up. Both of you!" Grecia smacked them both with separate files. "What are you both yammering on about? This is a very important meeting."

"This." Odette shoved Xena's parchment into Grecia's hands. Xena did the same with Odette's papers. Grecia looked over both, murmuring to herself as she read over their words. Her face, a seafoam green, paled to

white cream as her eyes darted from paper to paper. Her mouth hung open as she rubbed over both papers. Both were true. Both were signed by Ash. Both accepted the job.

“See.” Xena tapped her right foot against the floor with impatience.

“This is impossible. The system only sends out the acceptance letter to whoever Ash approved for the job. It’s automatic. Unless.” Grecia pivoted to stare into the office full of people behind her. All of them talked over champagne. They had lost interest in the two women at the door and had instead turned it to Ash and the CEO. Their muffled words lost in the crowd of others who each spoke. The glass muddled all their words. Grecia sighed loudly. Then she pivoted back to Xena and Odette. “Look, it doesn’t matter. Congrats, you both got the job. If the system both sent you acceptance letters, then you’re both in the system as Vice presidents. Just figure it out yourselves.”

“What!” Xena and Odette chimed in unison.

“You’re both vice presidents now.” Grecia ground her teeth as she slapped the acceptance letters back into their hands.

“Let us just talk to Ash, this must have been a mistake.” Odette staggered forward.

“Cannot, Ash is going on her worldwide tour with the CEO to see the other buildings and contracts. She will not be in office. So, it’s actually going to work out better that there are two of you. Just divide the work evenly and don’t kill each other, unless you want to- actually that will make my work easier. Doesn’t matter either way. When Ash gets back, we can see if she wants to demote one of you. Text me if you have any questions about the job, but bother me with any nonsense and I won’t answer.”

Odette and Xena stood dumbfounded and in shock as Grecia handed both a moist business card. Then she whirled around on her heels and marched back inside the room. The glass doors clicked shut with the telltale sign of magic sealing them out. Purple, hazy runes covered the glass so even the sound died as well. Xena turned to stare at Odette, who only stared back in horror.

They were going to work together? They *had* to work together!

“One of us is going to die or quit,” Xena blurted out in one breath.

Odette set her brows down on her face and clenched her fists around the papers she was handed. “It’s not going to be me.”

“It’s not going to be me.” Xena crossed her arms.

“We will see.” Odette whipped on her heel and stormed off toward the elevators. Xena smirked. Finally, Odette seemed to fill out her clothes and grow an inch as her heels clicked angrily away. It was only a fair battle if Odette fought back.



Odette rubbed her brow as she paced in front of her desk. The office was a mess. How she loathed messy offices. If it wasn’t bad enough to have to share the job without a chance to fight it, she had to share an office. They agreed on one thing, and it was neither of them was going to agree with the other. They wouldn’t let the other have the office alone. It was the vice president’s office. So, naturally, they each wanted it. Odette claimed Ash’s old desk. Mostly a childish tantrum by sitting on it and refusing to move. She even put a magnet charm on her body so Xena couldn’t lift her up. Naturally, Xena moved the desk with her on it to one side of the office and said she’d get her own desk. Then both their offices arrived soon after. They split the office dead even, even down to who had what glass panes.

Odette already set up her side of the office and scheduled a moment to sit down with HR. Xena, however, sat on the floor building her desk as loudly as she could.

“Honestly, couldn’t you have just brought up your old desk?” Odette rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Didn’t have one.” Xena continued to hammer pieces of wood together. Brimming from ear to ear, she flipped over the part she had and began to work on the next.

“You’re joking. You didn’t have a desk? You’re a department head!” Odette stomped her foot as she rounded the corner of her own desk. She couldn’t even start making phone calls or set up interviews to replace her old position until someone stopped making so much racket. Her brain rattled around in her skull with every thud of Xena’s ancient hammer.

“Yeah, a department that doesn’t sit around all day and play with dead things.” Xena put her hands behind her for a moment to crack every bone

she possibly could.

Odette shivered with every subtle crack. Her skin crawled. Xena snickered to herself before going back to work on her desk. Odette clenched the edge of her desk tightly. Her right eye twitched. She inhaled steadily through her nose.

“I don’t *play* with dead things. Sometimes body parts are needed for a ritual or spell.” Odette pulled out her crystal pad. At the very least she could send emails and answer messages while she waited for the wild boar to stop covering the floor in wood dust. Odette pulled up her email and found it flooded. Her eyes rolled at the amount of sixty emails. *Typical*. Everyone needed something. She started at the top and her stomach dropped. The company insurance department reached out. They asked for the date that they needed to change Clara in the system to a wife dependent. Something Odette had planned months prior... back when her fiancé begged to get off her parents’ insurance. Just another burden that Odette absorbed for Clara. Once upon a time, she would have readily agreed to anything Clara asked.

Odette prodded at the crystal’s edge. Her rune-covered nails scratched at the metallic edges. It was the size of a book but the weight of a feather, framed in golden metal with soft velvet backing. Odette opened the email but immediately closed it. Her forefinger hovered over it. She couldn’t answer it, not yet.

Xena flopped onto her back as she assembled the desk in the air over her. “Sounds like playing to me.”

Odette jumped in her skin. The sound of Xena’s obnoxiousness returned to her ears. Reality sank into her skin as she blinked rapidly. “What? Oh, will you stop it? You wouldn’t know the first thing about magic anyway. All you do is bully your initiates and swing your sword around all day.” Odette swatted at the air flippantly.

She shifted through a few other emails. One was a welcome letter from HR about her new role, further cementing her thoughts that Xena was a mistake. Until she came across the one from the parking garage saying they would add another vice president spot for them. Then, she opened the email about training for her new position. It would start Monday of next week. Plenty of time to get Xena to quit. Odette peered up from her crystal to see Xena holding up the desk with one hand while the other struggled to

screw in something on the inside. Xena poked her tongue out the side of her mouth. Odette swallowed the laughter of seeing her struggle.

“You know, you could ask for help.” Odette put her chin in her hands. “Wouldn’t even break a sweat doing it either.”

“Not with that condescending smile on your lips.” Xena barely glanced at Odette before she returned to using her feet to hold up the desk. Both hands worked on the desk. “Besides, it’s a good workout.”

“You gym rats are all the same.” Odette sat back in the plush leather chair. Her side of the office had Ash’s desk, her chair, a plant, two filing cabinets, and a tall bookshelf ready for her to fill. Xena had her half-made desk and boxes. Lots of boxes, all labeled ‘stuff’. Odette chuckled to herself as she opened the next email.

“Hey, gym rat or not, at least I don’t offer bitchy help.” Xena sat up.

“It wasn’t bitchy.” Odette frowned hard, catching Xena’s eyes. “I was merely inputting that you would use less energy building one of many surfaces by asking for help. Doesn’t have to be from me.”

“See! And that’s why you’re a mage. Because you can’t handle anything on your own.” Xena pointed a finger at Odette.

“Ah, yes, back to the whole, I use magic therefore I must be ‘weak and docile’ mentality. Remind me again, was it a single father who raised you? Very macho, probably had a goatee?” Odette stared down at her crystal. The time stared back at her. It was already late in the morning, and she had accomplished nothing. She hated wasting time, especially bickering with Xena. As much as she enjoyed seeing her struggle to assemble a simple desk, Odette had a new job to do. “As much as I enjoy our talks, I have work to do. While you play around with your desk and boxes labeled stuff, I’m going to go check in with the department heads.”

“It was just a mustache! Thank you!” Xena bellowed from behind her newly assembled desk. Odette stood with her crystal pad and walked around her desk. For a moment she thought of staying. Then she pointed a finger at the desk and with a wicked grin, “*assemble, please.*”

Magic tossed Xena out from under the desk as all the pieces flew together toward the desk in the blink of an eye. Screwing themselves into place, the drawers sliding in, the whole desk together in less than three seconds. Xena stared at the desk, then at Odette in shock as the Fae sauntered out of their shared office.

She could have made the whole desk fall apart. Watching every piece fly across the room and leave her back at square one would have been priceless. However, Xena might take it out on her and her furniture. It was better to see the rage, but an impressed expression, painted on Xena's face. Odette chuckled to herself as she walked to the elevator. She used her badge to unlock the elevator and rode down in blissful silence. Her crystal lit up with a new email.

From: Xena Battlemoar

To: Odette Plum

Very funny. But one of the drawers is upside down.

Odette smirked as she replied.

From: Odette Plum

To: Xena Battlemoar

No, it's not.

-Odette Plum

Vice President **Knight&Mage Inc.**

Odette stepped off at the floor for the department heads and found all of them loitering around her empty office. Her office had been the first one on the working floor. She used to sit across the hall from the conference room. The small cubicle was surrounded by a large warehouse working floor. They designed the department floors like a maze. Some said it was intentional. Most understood that expansion and company foresight was not something architects understand. Especially when designing a castle.

"I see sixteen highly paid managers loitering in the halls and a couple dozen employees on the department floor unsupervised." Odette put one hand on her hip and tapped her shoes impatiently.

Sixteen full-grown adults whirled around like children caught with their hands in a cookie jar. K&M employed people across the board. Shape, size, color, and creed did not sway because the city around them was a mixed bag. As if the dragon that created King's Fall took a handful of every creation it found along the way and dropped them into the ash.

Their staff reflected it with an odd mix of adults from all walks of life but with one commonality, *every manager in this building was nosy*. They sheepishly shuffled out of her old doorway and meandered toward their respective offices.

Odette spared a glance into her office. *Empty*. All her files were already collected by HR and by internal review to ensure no one could snoop into her old files. They worked fast. *Really fast*. She turned on the lights and found it completely spotless. Not even an imprint in the chair from where she spent hours debating her mental state. Odette glanced out to the hall of gossip-hungry managers. “Before you all go.”

They bound back toward her with glee, all smiling faces and raised brows. Half of them pulled out notepads and pens, the other whipped out their crystalpads. Odette spared a glance at hers, no new emails arrived. Closing the velvet lid onto it, she snapped her fingers. The rune on her thumb lit up and the crystal disappeared. With a pop, her device entered her personal pocket dimension where she kept her keys, wallet, and a few spare pieces of gum- so she never had to give out her stash.

“As you’ve likely already heard, both Xena and I have been named vice president.” She folded her hands in front of her stomach. Her eyes searched the crowd of eager faces. “Which means there are two positions here at department head level. They are open, plus the position for the vice president’s assistant, as Grecia has followed Ash into her new position as President of the company. I would like to announce these open positions where the job will likely be posted by sundown today if they are not already. It seems HR and internal are already on the ball today so expect them to be thorough about this transition. If you, or your subordinates, were, are, or might be interested in these positions, please apply immediately as I will not allow the seats to stay open very long. What questions do you have about the open jobs?” Odette felt herself again as her previous coworkers began to mule over the news. A few scribbled some things down but kept to themselves while others whispered amongst themselves.

Odette waited for them collectively to settle before she continued. This, leading a room and a team? *This she was born to do!* Her father often said she ought to become a professor at his school. She could have with her magical prowess. However, if she were being honest, being a professor wasn’t rewarding in the way she wanted it to be. Plus, it involved dealing

with snot-nosed children. Odette barely survived school without breaking classmates' noses. He wanted her to teach other people's crouch goblins? *No, this was much better.* She inhaled steadily before exhaling with a smile. "Onto other news, I suspect you are all wondering how examinations will go this year."

"Well, seeing as they are in three weeks and our yearly bonus is tied to them, yes." Gilga, the department head over Merchandise Deployment, or Sales, spoke up from the center of the group. Gilga and Odette weren't close, but they worked together fine. Gilga didn't sugar coat things and often spoke before thinking. This usually resulted in Odette having to remind her of workplace decorum. Other than her mouth, Gilga was a delightful earth genasi. Skin like slate rock, hair of moss, and shaped like a carved statue.

"Do not worry, as they will still go on without delay. You should find the evaluation invites in your email after Internal turns over what documentation Ash had for them. Plus, the interviews will be unbiased." Odette nodded.

"But it's you and Xena doing them, right?" Marc chimed in from the right corner. Much like Xena, Marc was a Goliath. Six foot three, built like a brick wall, chiseled in every way with onyx hair braided down his back. He wore a three-piece suit and round spectacles he pushed further up his nose. He was the department head of Knight Placement. Xena would train, upgrade, and evaluate the knights, while it was Marc's department to place them in jobs and get them contracted out. To say Odette had spoken to Marc more than three words would be generous.

"Yes." Odette straightened her spine.

A huge divide often fell on the departments depending on who sat in the Vice President's office. Ash rose from the magical department. Therefore, her bias leaned toward the magical team. Odette never had an issue getting vacation or project budgets approved. She knew that those in the knight's departments felt estranged from upper-level management. Odette promised she would not be the same. She would be better. She *was* better! Which meant realizing and undoing her own biases. Starting now. "I know that many of the knight or knight adjacent departments felt undervalued and underappreciated under Ash's reign as Vice President, but things are going to be different. I will not be basing our evaluations strictly on what Ash or even my own personal feelings are. These will be

based on metrics and facts. So, bring to your eval, the numbers. I want you to answer one simple question with facts and numbers. Did your department succeed under your influence? Yes or No and why. Your bonus will be based on the answer.”

The crowd broke into soft murmurs as they turned inwardly to discuss her words. Odette relaxed her shoulders as the department heads nodded solemnly to themselves. She waited once more for them to collect themselves before she continued. “Furthermore, I will be stopping in to see each of your departments in the upcoming week. Keep an eye out because it will be random, and it will be at any time. Until then, if you have a burning question that cannot wait, feel free to email me. Thank you, you are dismissed.”

“And what about Xena? Will she be walking these inspections?” Evelyn fluttered her tiny wings to poke herself up above the crowd. Evelyn was a hundred percent pixie. Pink flesh with rosy hair, pearlescent wings, and only four feet tall. She was the department head of Magical Research and Discovery. She and Odette worked side by side often. Everything she and her team unearthed, discovered, or experimented on came into Odette’s office or department floor at some time. Evelyn’s round face pinched in worry as she flittered toward the front of the group.

“Evelyn, careful of flight over other’s heads.” Odette pointed at Evelyn’s feet. They skittered over the tops of Jonas’, the centaur in charge of accounting’s horns.

“Yes. Right.” Evelyn flew down, giggling nervously as she avoided Jonas’ hooves.

Then Odette peered up to the floors above where Xena was likely having a fistfight with an office chair. As much as she wanted to say no, she knew better. Xena would find out and butt her way into her walks. Odette wanted her to quit. The team couldn’t know. She had to show a united front. At least to the department heads and below. They deserved a well-working machine, while Odette fought Xena out in secret.

“And to answer your question, I expect she will be present for the ones she values the most.” Odette snapped her fingers, her thumb illuminating again. Her crystal dropped into her arms. She opened the cover and found her email bombarded again. “Excuse me, I have so many emails.”

“I imagine.” Evelyn floated two feet in the air till she flew at eye level with Odette. “Do you still want to do lunch today like we always do?”

“I would love to, Evelyn, but I will have to take a raincheck on that. I have a feeling I’ll be working through lunch.” Odette grimaced as she pulled open the email from Internal security. The tag line in all bold stated ‘security threat- immediate discussion’. Which filled her with dread. Odette hugged the crystal to her chest before she peered up at Evelyn. “But definitely by the end of the week. I want to be able to catch lunch with as many of you as I can. I am still accessible.”

“But you’re not Odette anymore.” Evelyn shrugged.

“Whoa, hold on. I am still me.” Odette cocked her hip out.

“The old Odette would have texted me that she broke up with her abusive ex.” Evelyn looked everywhere but Odette as she fluttered backward an inch.

“What?” Odette’s stomach dropped fully into her heels. Her mouth ran dry as she clutched her crystal harder. “Where did you hear that?”

“She posted it all over social media. Made a big show of it too on Crystalgram. I wouldn’t look at your socials for a week. They’re bad.” Evelyn poked her hands into her pink slacks with a pitying look pointed at Odette.

Odette shrank another inch inward as she stared at Evelyn. It was one thing for Clara to scream and throw a fit to her face, to storm out and leave her ring. It was something different for her to socially proclaim it. This truly meant it was over. Clara didn’t post anything unless she wanted her followers to spread the news. Odette’s right hand moved over her left, covering the empty space where the ring used to sit. Her finger felt foreign to her as she tenderly prodded it.

“I suspect her hundreds of fans are swarming my page to send me death threats, huh?” Odette swallowed the lump in her throat. “No matter. I’m too busy to even notice.”

“You can text me. I’ll let you go but, Odette, we’re friends you know that right?” Evelyn smiled warmly, patting Odette’s shoulder. Then she floated away on a trail of pastel pink dust that coated the hardwood flooring. The reason they could never have carpet in any of the office space was the hoof marks, magic dust, and general dirty mud the knights tracked in. Odette brushed away some of the glitter with her toe to the side.

“But I can’t now, can I?” Odette murmured to herself as she slunk back to the elevator. She slapped her keycard against the scanner. “I’m your

boss now.”

If she couldn't be romantically happy or emotionally well, she could be professional. *Atleast she could do that right.*

Chapter Three:

Xena sat in Internals office with her boots kicked up onto the meeting table. A massive oval-shaped meeting room with nothing but thick black walls covered in crystal screens. Everything shimmered with secure magic and smokey runes. Sat the table, three assistants typed furiously on sturdy laptops. Internal was the department in charge of keeping the rest of the company in line. Samosa, the head of Internal, sat across from Xena, flipping between printed transcripts with a permanent scowl. Even when she greeted Xena at the door, she scowled. Oracles rarely have a moment's peace, let alone when they work for a place as big as K&M. Her blue-hued skin paled everywhere but her neck deepened to a choppy ocean color. Her eyes, fully white with no iris or color except for the thick line of lashes, stared through the paper.

"That bad, huh?" Xena chuckled.

"Cataclysmic," Samosa snarled.

"Yikes." Xena put down the silver dagger she brought to polish while she sat still. It clinked against the table. Samosa's eyes snapped to the dagger and twitched repeatedly until Xena took it back. "Sorry."

"How about you see that blade fly across the room and gut someone at top speed and tell me how funny it is to just leave weapons lying around." Samosa cocked her head to the side.

"I'll put it away, yeesh." Xena tucked it away in her boot. "You watch too many horror movies."

The door whipped open behind her as the scent of fresh florals filled the room. Odette must have been on the department head floor. Xena could place Evelyn's rosy dust anywhere! It stank so much. Odette shut the door behind her before stepping into Xena's view. She knocked Xena's feet off the table without question. Xena kicked at Odette's chair as if a reflex response. Odette set her crystal on the table before she kicked Xena firmly in the shins.

"Ow, real mature." Xena rubbed the indent from Odette's heels.

"Says the vice president with her dirty boots on the table." Odette wiped off the surface top.

“They are dirty.” Samosa returned to her papers. She set out a few for Odette and Xena separately.

“Want me to call the clean team in here?” Xena snatched up her set of papers to peruse messenger text all over the paper. Without having to ask, she knew who these were between.

The rumors of Daphne and Chatterbee filled the office weeks ago. Nothing stays a secret for long. Chatterbee was on the clean team while Daphne was the head of distribution. From the messages in front of Xena, they were very fond of explicitly explaining their fantasies. No wonder his name was Chatterbee, *he never shut up!* “Oh, oh that’s gross.”

“This is excessive, but even on company servers, this is a slap on the wrist. They’re in completely different departments.” Odette sat her papers down.

“Wait till you find out how they showed their gift-giving love language,” Samosa huffed.

“If I find pictures of Chatterbee’s wiener on my crystal, I’m going to bleach my eyeballs.” Xena flipped the papers upside down on the table.

“I second that.” Odette rubbed her temples tenderly.

Samosa motioned at one of the assistants. The one on the left plugged a small device into their computer. The screens around them filled up with pictures swiftly. Xena flinched inwardly, ready to never be able to look at either employee again. Then the horror set in, and her body melted down into her seat. The screen-captured Daphne in multiple spots stashing expensive crystals and weapons under trashcan liners and in boxes. Then, in the next photo, Chatterbee removing ‘waste’ into his clean cart.

“So, never mind then, on calling clean team in to clean up after my dirty boots then, huh?” Xena spun around in her chair to see all the pictures. Odette groaned softly under her breath as she rolled her eyes. Yet both turned to watch the show of security footage filling up the room.

Odette whistled under her breath. Xena nodded as she crossed her arms under her chest. Their gaze returned to Samosa. The pictures collected themselves into a pile on the screen ahead of them. The other two assistants rose and slid two crystal flash drives across the tables. Xena took up her own and plugged it into her phone. Odette plugged hers into her crystal pad.

“It goes without saying that we will be investigating the money this cost the company.” Samosa folded her hands over the papers.

“How long has this gone on?” Xena chewed on the inside of her cheeks.

“How did this kind of shrink go unnoticed? The money on that one blue enchantment crystal alone would have sent up a red flag.” Odette flipped through the photos on her crystal screen.

“From my reports, everything they slipped out wasn’t above the company investigation threshold, nothing big until recently.” Samosa took up a remote control. She flipped the channels on the screens. A security camera played behind her head. “I suspect they started a romance to cover up their theft when they took the enchantment crystal and the cursed sword. That crystal is from the newer line of power enhancers. Not to mention the price tag on the sword is worth more than them. They would rather be moved out of their positions or departments for an unapproved romance than for theft. But in my investigation of all reports of sexual or romantic misconduct between employees, I spotted Daphne acting strange. Breaking and claiming out items irregularly, and the claims department was never able to support or deny what was broken. Then Chatterbee collecting trash in areas he was not told to clean. Finally caught them on the back up cameras. They were smart, never doing it out in the open and always covering the good camera angles.”

“But not smart enough, clearly.” Xena watched Samosa flip between footage on the screen. “What do you need from us.”

“I am cleared with HR to fire both of them, but in order to pursue a full investigation and gather evidence to charge them with grand theft, I have to have approval from the Vice President. Well, vice presidents now.” Samosa slid over a clipboard to each of them. Odette pulled a pen out of her blazer pocket and scanned over the paper. Xena held up the clipboard, eyeballing the paper before her.

“What? Having trouble reading paperwork?” Odette whispered as she initialed and signed at the bottom.

“I like to know what I’m signing, thank you,” Xena huffed as she snatched the pen out of Odette’s hands. Odette’s mouth hung ajar as Xena scribbled her initials and signature upon the lines provided.

Odette ripped the pen out of Xena’s hand. “I do as well, but I can read faster than a pre-schooler.”

“Just because you got a fancy education at a magic boarding school doesn’t mean you can chastise me about my reading speed.” Xena slid her

clipboard across the table.

“Clearly you could have done with a stronger education than getting hit in the head too many times with a practice sword.” Odette flattened her blazer as she stood up. She nodded to Samosa, “Keep me in the loop.”

“I sure will,” Samosa snickered as she collected both clipboards. The assistants unplugged without even looking up and continued their typing. One clicked furiously on their mouse with no mercy.

Xena kicked her chair back to ensure it skittered in front of Odette. Odette jerked to a stop. Her eyes snapped up to Xena’s with disdain.

“What is the publicity plan for this?” Xena leaned one hip against the table.

“There isn’t one. Our hope is to quietly terminate them and then charge them before they have a chance to flee.” Samosa shrugged as she stood up from her side of the desk. Her scowl returned to her pointed face.

“Typical,” Xena and Odette muttered under their breath in unison.

“Do either of you have a better idea?” Samosa planted her hands on her hips.

“No, just keep us informed.” Odette tucked Xena’s chair back at the table. She sauntered out of the room, forcing Xena to follow her. Xena closed the doors shut behind her. The hiss of air as the room pressurized under a security spell sounded behind her.

“We should have a plan in place for when this goes public. Knowing them they won’t go quietly.” Odette opened her email again as she cleared out certain filler internal emails.

“Well, the best bet would be to get with the other department head for distribution first and then maybe talk with Pucker in the Clean team to figure out where we can nip this in the bud. Maybe make it about the romance and make it seem like we’re trying to kill the romance rumors?” Xena pulled out her phone to find Pucker’s number. Having the cleaning supervisor on speed dial was a must in a knight’s line of duty. The number of times Xena had to buy Pucker pizza and wings at Mumford’s for a solid clean... well she should at least write him off on her taxes at this point.

Xena waited in silence for a response. Until she peered up from her phone and found Odette lingering on an email on her crystal pad.

“So, we like my idea?” Xena prodded Odette’s bicep with her pointer finger.

“Huh, no, absolutely not.” Odette waved off her hand.

Xena eyeballed Odette as she poked at the screen of her crystal. Waiting with one hand on her hip, the goliath hovered her thumb over the send button. Finally, Odette inhaled sharply and sent her email. After that, her hand went to her bare ring finger. She stared upwards as if she wanted the tears that welled up to roll backward. Then her attention fluttered up to Xena's face. She raised an eyebrow in response. Odette shook her head with a sigh.

"You know, if this job is taking too much of a toll on you, we can put you right back into your old job," Xena smirked.

"Oh please, as if this job could ever be too much for me. You, however, are clearly over your head." Odette took ahold of the rails and trotted down the stairs leading out of the internal hallway.

"How?" Xena snorted loudly as she galloped after Odette.

"Wanting to ask your buddies for help when we were told to keep this quiet? The best course of action is to act like there is no investigation. Besides, I already announced we were doing inspections earlier today, we don't have to make up a reason." Odette slowed at the last step to straighten out her skirt.

Xena opened her mouth to speak when her stomach clenched. The sound of their stomachs growling filled the air as they landed on their floor.



Odette sat behind her desk, cupping the waxed carton of her lunch. Nose deep in an internal review of Ash's on her desk, she shoveled food into her mouth. Huddling in her blazer and the heat of her food, Odette shivered. The temperature in the office dropped significantly under Xena's abuse. Complaining she 'liked it cold when she had to think'. Odette tried to enchant her desk. Then she found all her supplies to do so were *mysteriously* misplaced. She would not give in to Xena's childish antics. Instead, she countered by ordering food Xena hated. Her food filled the room with its delicious scent. Sautéed noodles covered in fragrant, savory sauce and filled with crispy meat and soft vegetables. Odette would be full for days. *Worth it.* Just to see Xena's face pinch at the scent. Plus, she added a few sprinkles of Evelyn dust in the cracks of Xena's desk. She

found the sprinkles on her shoulder and just *happened* to brush them off in Xena's direction.

Roses and hot food filled the air. Truly it stank in the office. But if Xena wanted it cold, then at least Odette would be full. The skin on her exposed legs prickled. How she wished she'd worn slacks today. Her sheer pantyhose did nothing to trap in heat. They were too thin to charm and would rip if she tried drawing runes into them.

Odette sat in peaceful silence while they went over the evals Ash left for the department heads. Until they flipped to a new page and Odette's face brimmed. *Xena's evaluation*. Now, how did that get there?

"Xena Battlemoar, valued at meets expectations. Hmm, not exceeds." Odette glanced up from her files. She swallowed her food with glee as Xena glared up from her stack of files. Xena scrambled through her files to find where Odette was in her pile. Odette put down her food. Settling the file closer to her, she pointed at the survey description. "Xena exemplifies a strong, natural leading capability but can be considered too open with her subordinates. Often Xena communicates unprofessionally and has expressed her emotional responses to stressful situations. Of note, Xena has been to sensitivity training three times this year at the request of her coworkers and peers. Wow, three times. And it didn't stick."

Odette bounced happily in her seat. Xena lurched up from her desk and stormed across the office. "Yeah, and who sent me there? At the request of you, you prick. Give me that."

"You have your own! This is mine." Odette pushed away from the desk, clutching the file to her chest.

"Which means yours is in my pile." Xena's lips curled into a malicious smirk.

Odette's smile fell as she scrambled back to her desk. She rummaged through her pile at the same speed that Xena did. Slapping open a file before Odette could summon it out of her hand, the goliath woman held up the anti-spell dagger in front of her. She backed around her desk.

"Let's see, Odette Plum. Also valued at meets expectations." Xena flipped through the file as Odette scrambled to pull open her own.

Her heart raced in her chest as she stared at her awful company photo next to the words 'meets expectations'. Heartbeat in her ears, roaring and thumping like thunder over a rock concert, she lost all control of her voice. Only a small squeak of betrayal fell off her lips.

Xena continued, “Odette exemplifies a strong natural leading capability but can be considered too closed off to her subordinates. Often Odette is considered stand-offish and distant to her subordinates who are afraid to open up to her about mistakes. She has expressed calm and collected responses to stressful situations but will not reach out for help when she could clearly benefit from it. Of note, Odette has been reprimanded by a supervisor prior to being promoted for casting a hex that resulted in a peer being tossed out a window. Holy cow, that rumor was true! You tossed Jabber McGillian out the third-floor window?”

“He had wings, it’s fine, it’s not like he fell three floors.” Odette slapped her hands against the desk.

“What does someone have to do to warrant a hex from Odette Plum?” Xena set the file down onto her pile.

“Slap my ass.” Odette pushed up to her feet.

“Well, yeah, that’ll do it.” Xena shrugged, tucking the blade back into her boot. “At least he didn’t get away with it. Even with your punishment being a bit, *steep*.”

“Well, it seems we both didn’t get the review we wanted. *Or deserved*.” Odette snatched up her food, kicked off her heels, and folded her legs under her. Pushed back from the desk, Odette shoveled food into her mouth with aggressive gusto. She stared at their files side by side. Odette always received ‘exceeds expectations’. She prided herself on it. Reaching out to flip to the last page in their files, she stared at the stamp printed at the bottom of their forms. ‘Recommended for promotion’ stained the page in bold, red ink. She chewed over a warm chunk of broccoli as she absorbed the words. Then her eyes glanced up at Xena. She stared at the same page.

“Do you think it was a mistake?” Odette swallowed her food over the lump in her throat. She took up the steaming cup of tea and sipped it tenderly.

“Our evals?” Xena’s voice barely floated in the air over their heads. Her amber gaze snapped up to meet Odette’s. There was a curiously cool aura floating off the other woman that Odette had never seen before. Usually, Xena felt red. If it was the heat of her rage, the audacity, or even the smug bravado that rolled off her in waves, Xena felt cherry red. Yet now, Odette felt soft waves of maroon and purple. It accented her silver-tinted skin and the black ink that covered her exposed forearms.

“Our promotion. How we were both promoted, and no one seems to have been thrown off. Not even HR batted an eye, even seemed to have everything ready. So why were we the only ones surprised?” Odette fixed her skirt over her tucked limbs. Like a tent over her frosty legs.

“Ash has always been a little secretive, a little shady. Honestly, I think she poisoned Heinrich to take his position.” Xena planted her rump firmly on the desk.

“Xena, that’s a huge accusation.” Odette pulled her wheely chair to the desk a second time. She continued to poke and scoop out her lunch. “But I think she planned for this.”

“And what makes you think she planned for this?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I think she figured we’d fight. Publicly, like more dramatically than anyone has in the past. I think she meant for us to like to devastate something. You saw her when we came charging at the office. She almost looked excited.” Odette poked at her food. Xena sat in silence as they both mewed over the words. “No, disregard that. I’m just being stupid and paranoid.”

Odette peered up to the looming shadow that appeared over her desk. She stared up into Xena’s face. Eyebrows furrowed, Xena cocked her head to the left. Then Xena stole a fried roll straight out of Odette’s lunch bag and shook her head. “You’re not stupid. I was thinking it too.” Xena popped the roll in her mouth.

Odette swallowed hard on her tongue as Xena stole a second roll. She towered over Odette. From this close, a soft mint wafted off Xena’s arms. A muscle-relaxing lotion, she could spot the glimmer of it over the dark ink of her tattoos. Xena’s tattoos were thick lines and sharp corners, a swirling mess of a language Odette could never read. She resisted the urge to reach out and touch them. In the seconds Xena leaned over her, she could see them along Xena’s collar. They went further down than Odette ever imagined. Her eyes trailed the button down that curved around all of Xena’s torso. She wondered how Xena never popped a button, ever. *Even when she trained.* Odette could never think of a time when Xena ripped a shirt despite never wearing the right size.

Then Xena returned to her side of the office. “You ought to order more of these next time. I’ll suffer the scent of your garlic noodles or whatever if I get like twenty of these.”

Odette choked on her saliva. Sputtering to life, she tossed back a searing gulp of tea. She flinched as she coughed to clear her singed throat. “Yeah. Sure. Whatever.”

“It’s the muscle relaxer, isn’t it? It’s a little stronger on the scent than I like but it’s so good.” Xena peered at her arms.

“No, no, the mint is fine!” Odette flailed her arms as she shook her head vigorously. “I like it.”

Xena flashed a wide smile. Odette fumbled with her own fingers as she tapped the rune on her pinkie to her throat. The burn eased away as the hum of magic filled her neck. Vibrations bounced through all her muscle layers. Then she sighed with relief when the pain went faded. At least the runes on her fingernails wouldn’t fail her. *Even if her mind did.* Odette promised she was going to be better than Ash. Odette could not fall into a trap so easy as ogling her nemesis at work. Even if she was built like a muscly model. Vice Presidents had been fired... *or accidentally poisoned...* for less.

Chapter Four:

Xena propped her boots up on the wooden post as she tied her laces. Peaches, her were-raven, fake hiccupped from his usual perch inside the barn. His beak clicked together, informing Xena he wanted out of said barn. Xena stretched awkwardly across the post and flicked the lock open. Peaches burst through the doors in a flurry of feathers. Cawing into the air loudly, he circled over her head. Then he perched upon the rafters. She stomped her boots down against the gravel, freshly secured, and followed him into the other barn. Xena flipped on all the twinkling lights for him. Peaches pecked and danced around the lights like one would a campfire. Stretching his seven-foot wingspan of black feathers, he glistened. Massive hooks for talons clicked against the wood as he moved. Clacking his green and purple beak happily, he woke the rest of the barn.

The muzzle of a were-bear butted inbetween Xena's legs and hoisted her up. *Snuggles had no concept of personal space.* Xena struggled off the massive bear's face. Then she whirled around and nuzzled his face. He happily gnawed on the main barn post affectionately. Drool ran down and collected at the base of the post as usual.

"You off to work again?" Dinah, her father, called from outside of the barn. A seven-foot-tall goliath, steel-colored flesh with thickly lined tattoos to frame his cheeks and muscles, stepped into her view. Dinah wore dirty overalls covered in grass stains, tiny patches, and saw dust. He rounded the doorway of the barn. Snuggles galloped toward Dinah. He took the blunt force hug with stride. Grunting with effort, he fought the bear for control before wrapping his arms around the fluffy monster. Most were-bears are three times the size of a polar bear and bipedal. But Snuggles was still young, small, and stupid as a post.

"Yeah, kind of happens every day for a while, it seems." Xena fingered her hair up and away from her face. Golden blond, the exact color of her mother's delicate locks. *Always braided with expertise.* Marnie always took care of Xena's hair when she was little. Grown-up Xena dealt with her mop of hair the best she could.

"Damn salary." Dinah shoved Snuggles to the ground. He stepped around the bear gingerly in his muck boots. He sloshed through the hay of the barn until he stood a foot from Xena. She wore her barn overalls over

her slacks and button-down until she left home. The last thing she needed was Odette griping that she looked muddy one more time. Xena put her right hand out for Peaches. He swooped down and perched on her exposed hand. He made kissy sounds as she stroked his head.

“Damn. Damn! Damn! Pretty bird. Pretty peaches. Damn! How are you!” Peaches sang into the air as he bobbed his head up and down to his own beat.

“Look what you did, you taught the bird a curse word.” Xena motioned at her massive raven. Peaches let out a loud *caw* before fluttering back up into the sculpted rafters.

“Oh, trust me, the bird knows more than damn. That’s for damn sure.” Dinah took up his pitchfork. He stabbed at the large bales of hay within the barn. “So, when are you going to buy your own place and move out.”

“When you can survive your werewolf rescue without me, old man.” Xena cocked her hip out. “Remember my *damn salary* pays the electricity on this old rescue and puts food in your gut. You crotchety geezer.” She kicked at him. The truth was Xena owned the farm because it was his dream. She bought and paid for everything because of him. He wanted to give back to the community after he was saved by a werewolf as a child. That, and after Xena’s mother died, he had no self-control. Started adopting all sorts of animals no matter what they were or where they’d been. The Were-Rescue homed more than her father could take on by himself. Which is why she lived at home and why she paid good money for a stable hand. *Who was late...*

The little butthead came flying over the gates of the rescue, half-dressed and hair a mess. But West was a good kid, young but good. Perfect for her father to boss around and tell his stories too. West was half-goblin, making him short but sturdy with green, spikey ears. The tusks growing in were adorable at best. West waved to her before taking up his own pitchfork and shoveling hay to match Dinah. Xena took her leave, stomping toward her truck. She made sure to make as much noise as possible. She did not want to jump scare the other were-animals. One were-tiger bite ago she learned never to sneak anywhere on the property. *Not if you wanted all your fingers and toes, at least.*

Xena clambered over the wooden post and pulled her overalls off. She flicked off her muck boots into the bed of her truck. She folded her overalls into the trunk box before tossing herself inside the cabin. Her

breath showed in front of her face. She rubbed her hands together, shivering in the cool morning air. Winter air was cruel in King's Fall. Cranking the heat and radio, she floored the truck across the gravel. Her huge wheels ground the gravel to dust. Her truck bucked much like a horse onto the main road before barreling toward town. She cut off the heat as the engine purred to life fully. Her phone rang before she hit the main highway. At least an hour before Odette and Xena were meant to arrive, the sun was barely above the horizon. Pucker's name and poorly sculpted goatee filled her screen.

Xena poked the screen as she cranked her stereo down. "Is someone dead, about to be dead, or on fire?"

"HA! I wish, but no, was just told I had to get vice president approval before I changed the locks on all the equipment. You know, because of the thing we discussed."

"Yeah, yeah, just don't make me regret trusting you, Pucker. Oh, and also don't tell VP Odette about this. This thing we discussed stays between you and me, got it?" Xena flipped on her turn signal as she revved her engine. Her truck bound onto the highway with little regard for anyone refusing to leave the lane. The tiny electric car flipped her off and honked, but Xena ignored it.

"Don't worry, mums the word," Pucker chuckled. "Don't run over anyone and I'll put the invoice in your inbox along with the other papers."

"Whoa, whoa, what other papers?" Xena stretched her arms out. Her shoulders cracked loudly, filling her body with a blissful release.

"To be honest boss, I've seen HR, internal, sales, and at least three other departments drop fat stacks of papers into both yours and Odette's boxes. There's got to be a charm on there because I didn't think they were going to leave any room."

Xena glanced at her phone for a moment before glaring out through the windshield. What on earth could be so important it must be in paper form? Xena grimaced as she tugged on her ponytail in stress. Twisting it at the ends, she fidgeted in her seat. When Pucker cleared his throat, she realized she hadn't spoken. "I'll deal with it when I get there, just get me that bill for the new locks. And don't spend too much or else it's coming out of your paycheck."

"You got it boss. How much is too much?"

“If I can find the same lock on company inventory magazines for less than what you bought, I’ll ring your neck.”

“Thanks Boss.” Pucker hung up the call. Xena cranked her volume back up till she couldn’t hear the thoughts in her own head. Xena pulled off the highway at the exit for King’s Fall and found the misty morning empty of people. No vehicles on the roads and no movement on the sidewalks. A city still asleep. She rolled down her windows, flipped off her radio, and let the air rush over her.

Then she pulled into the company garage and found Odette’s tiny four-door parked in the original Vice President spot. Xena parked as close as she could to the driver’s side of Odette’s car. When she turned off the engine, she heard the sharp cursing of a small woman. Odette crawled out of her passenger side. Xena broke into a fit of laughter as she rolled out of her truck. “Oh man, I had hoped to catch you after work. My plan worked so well.”

Odette bounced on one stocking-covered foot as she pulled on an ankle boot on the other. “You are psycho, what if you grazed my car?”

“I would never.” Xena put one hand over her heart and raised the other in a salute.

“You literally ductaped my doors shut once with industrial tape from the distribution department.” Odette pulled on her other heeled boot. Dressed in a fluffy black skirt with a high waist, tucking her blouse into the waistband. Xena couldn’t help but notice the twinkling ruby that dangled from a black cord around her throat. Or that her thigh-high stockings stayed completely in one place despite pulling her shoes on and having to climb out of her car. Her thick thighs were pristinely framed. Xena *definitely* didn’t catch herself staring at the way her blouse draped around her shoulders and breasts like falling water. *Definitely* didn’t enjoy Odette brushing her red hair off her throat, thus ruffling her blouse. Xena scanned the parking garage, forcing her attention elsewhere.

“That was a miscommunication.” Xena waved off the comment with a flap of her hand.

“Or intentional property damage,” Odette scoffed. She bristled while she stormed around Xena toward the elevator. Xena froze while she focused on keeping her gaze at an appropriate level before catching up to her.

“Something that I was never charged with, I’ll have you remember. Plus, your paint looks cleaner since.” Xena reached around Odette to smack the summon button. Odette peered up at Xena, towering over her. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Xena smirked before diving into the open elevator before Odette could step in. Then, she held open the doors. *Just to piss Odette off.*

Odette swatted Xena’s hands as she slid into the elevator and pressed the main building level. “Whatever, have you heard from the department heads who came in early yet?”

“Just Pucker.” Xena snorted.

“Why would Clean Team call you?” Odette whirled to face Xena.

Xena realized her mistake immediately. “Why would the other department heads call you?” She flipped the script.

Odette gawked and whirled back around. “To ask about their inspections obviously and to inquire about budgets. I told everyone who asked that we hadn’t decided on budgets yet. We’d only just begun to dive into evals.” She sighed softly under her breath. Odette’s shoulders sagged as she leaned into the wall of the elevator.

“It’s a lot of work for someone so small,” Xena breathed. Her lips curled into a grin as Odette whipped around a second time.

“*Small?* I’ll show you-”

The main floor chime dinged over their heads and the door ripped open behind her. Odette pivoted on her heel and stormed into the lobby of Knights&Mage with red cheeks and clenched fists. Xena poked her hands into her pockets. She lazily followed Odette’s bull charge through the crowd toward the upper-level elevator.

“Morning Nancy! How are the kids?” Xena waved to the secretary behind the welcome desk.

“She doesn’t have kids.” Odette snatched up Xena by the elbow and yanked her. Xena tumbled forward. Nancy didn’t even look up from her computer as she typed furiously.

“What? Of course, she has kids.” Xena ripped her arm back. Slapping her identification card against the scanner, the doors chimed and opened with a hiss.

“Nancy is divorced with no children. She has nieces and nephews she babysits.” Odette motioned for Xena to clamber into their next elevator.

“Then why has she never corrected me?” Xena prodded Odette in the side as she stepped inside.

“Because she’s too nice to tell you that you talk too much.” Odette pressed herself into the elevator. As soon as the doors slammed shut, she stared up at Xena with disdain. “Now don’t think I dropped my question from earlier, why did Pucker call you?”

“Because internal asked him to replace some locks and he was confused. He asked me because he likes me better.” Xena lied through her teeth with her arms crossed under her chest.

“Did you tell him about the incident after I told you not to?” Odette tapped her toes against the shiny metal elevator base.

“I didn’t tell him after I *decided* not to tell him, yes,” Xena sneered. She poked her tongue out at Odette who returned it. They continued to stick their tongues out at each other the whole ride up until they clambered out onto their floor. Xena allowed Odette out into the hall first before stepping out. “You want breakfast?”

“Yes, please, I didn’t have time to buy anything,” Odette whined.

“Me either. What do garden fairies eat? Lettuce?” Xena hip-checked Odette as they rounded the corner to their office. Odette pinched her hard on the waist. Xena hissed in pain, recoiling to her side of the office. “Ow!”

“Keep it up and you’ll suffer four sensitivity trainings this year.” Odette wagged her finger in Xena’s face. She stopped at her desk and tapped the empty crate on top. Her fingernail illuminated a rune on the black steel crate. Then, with a thud, all the papers in their inboxes dropped onto their desks. Xena’s scattered all over the floor while Odette’s neatly dropped into the crate.

“Real nice.” Xena scrambled to piece together all the stapled papers together.

“I told you to get a box for the spell to drop into, but did you listen to me? No.” Odette pulled her chair back from the desk and flopped into it. She pulled out stack after stack of paper. “Oh! How about that bakery on Fourth? They deliver and their muffins are always hot and soft.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of them. Their doughnuts are supposed to be mystical.” Xena pulled out her phone as she stacked her papers onto her desk. Without saying a word, a crate appeared in the center of her desk. She glanced over her shoulder at Odette with a glare. Then she dialed the

bakeries number off their website. Breakfast ordered with two mugs of coffee and one small lemon tea later, Xena dropped into her desk seat.

Odette had pulled her crystal pad out already. She read over the papers while opening her emails and company workspace. "It looks like HR paperwork for our new positions. New benefits and all, nothing irregular."

"Looks like a headache to me." Xena pulled out a pen and put it against the first stack of HR papers. She tried to focus without fiddling with her knife. In the end, she pulled the blade out of her boots and spun it in one hand while she signed with the other. For the first time since they joined offices, a peaceful quiet fell over them. Odette twirled her pen as she scanned through papers and emails at the same time. Xena finished one thing at a time. Until one of the mail runners popped their head into their office. Xena and Odette were greeted with their own basket of baked goods that smelled like pure magic.

Odette moaned audibly as she chewed into her orange and cranberry muffin with a brown sugar crust. Xena observed Odette bounce in her seat happily as she picked out large chunks to stuff into her mouth. Odette took a sip of her tea. "So good, so worth the delivery."

"So why didn't you have time for breakfast this morning?" Xena kicked her feet up on her desk as she shoved a whole sugar doughnut into her mouth.

"Rufus didn't want to go for a walk because it was wet outside thanks to the cold dew. Despite being a hellhound, he's so dramatic and pretentious about his paws. Did I tell you I bought that dog boots to wear? Outside? He's a hellhound! What hellhound needs boots to go pee outside?" Odette exploded her hands before her. Waving her muffin around as she spoke before poking more into her mouth. "If he wouldn't catch the liter on fire, I'd just liter train him and be done with it."

"Wait. You? Miss prim and proper and perfect has a hellhound?" Xena choked on her drink. Her feet fell to the floor in surprise. She slid forward, staring Odette directly in the eye.

"What? Like they're hard to keep?" Odette shrugged nonchalantly.

"You mean dogs that literally catch curtains on fire and eat live forest creatures for dinner? That kind of hellhound? Is easy to keep?" Xena blinked rapidly as she downloaded the information.

Odette's face pinched as she pouted. "Don't look at me like that! Hellhounds are misunderstood creatures. We used to have them run wild in

the dragon fields when I was a kid at the academy. They're always so lovable and such good dogs. A few fireproofing enchantments and a good extinguishing system for when they're babies and they're the easiest things in the world. Besides, he was so cute as a puppy with his big red eyes and wet nose. Who could say no to that?" Odette scrambled for her crystal pad, flipping through it a second before holding it up.

On the screen was the largest hound dog Xena had ever seen. She'd been bitten by a hellhound once. *They're no joke*. And Odette's 'puppy' was no small boy. The size of a normal werewolf with big floppy ears and ink-black hair that danced with flames. His jowls dripped steamy drool. Xena's eyebrows shot up on her face. Odette flipped the screen and smiled at it.

"Isn't he the cutest? I found him wandering the outskirts of King's Fall four years ago, just a pup, barely able to howl." Odette cooed as she flipped through pictures before showing a new one. Rufus was tiny, all ears and flames with a pouty face. Odette had dressed him in a plaid vest with a bow tie. "I can still get him to wear a bow tie on holidays. He likes to feel fancy."

"He's adorable," Xena chuckled. "Shortstop, I was worried you were about to show me some tiny, yappy rat or something. Not a full demonic entity."

"He's not a demon," Odette whined as she flipped her crystal shut. A wave of sadness washed over her face. "Clara always called him a demon."

Xena's blood ran cold as Odette dissolved from her childish glee to heartbreak. Odette swirled her tea slowly before sipping it tenderly. Xena licked her lips. Sugar crystals filled her mouth as she debated what to do or say.

"My dad has a Were-animal rescue. I help him with it." Xena watched for Odette to return to the conversation. Odette's blue eyes wavered before they locked onto Xena's face. Xena pulled out her phone to show a picture of her and her dad riding a Were-stallion. Which was just a stallion the size of a bus with four extra legs and a hunger for raw meat.

"That's a big horse," Odette exhaled in shock and awe. She scrambled out of her seat to come up to Xena's desk. She leaned over the desktop, watching in awe as Xena changed images.

Xena flipped through a few other rescues including Snuggles and Peaches, then ended on Jeremy. "He's just a plain old werewolf,"

“Wait, so he’s not a human?” Odette eyed the picture of a wolf able to stand on two feet and climb a tree. Hind haunches that could bound cliff tops and long arms to grapple things.

“Sometimes they are, sometimes they’re not. The human kind usually walks it off in the morning after we rescue them. Give them a hot breakfast and the number of a good specialist in town. But the ones who are mostly wolf, part something else, those are the ones we keep. This is Jeremy, we’ve had him for close to ten years now. He doesn’t have any fight in him, he’s just a lump.” Xena closed her phone screen.

“Wow.” Odette snatched a doughnut without hesitation.

“Hey!” Xena ripped her basket back.

Odette popped half the doughnut in her mouth. “Trade you.” She offered up a chocolate chip muffin.

“It’s only fair if I get to choose before you eat one of my things.” Xena took the offered muffin and chomped into it.



Odette stepped from the Sales department into the storage area. Gilga, the earth genasi department manager, spared one last piece of instruction to the employee behind the counter and then followed her into the backroom. Knights&Mage had a storefront for the public to shop. Low-priced items for the everyday person to need. Daggers that never rusted no matter how many hogs you kill, potions for travel or sickness, and general supplies. The storefront took up about eleven thousand square footage, not massive but enough space for plenty of options. It always included a cleric/healer and general magic user on staff. Gilga made sure the counter stayed staffed. Two employees were at the register and two were always stocking shelves. Nothing fancy, but Gilga’s department made up one-fourth of the sales for the entire building. They chose the right person when they put Gilga over Sales.

The two of them walked into the storage room for the sales department. Pulling out her crystal pad, Odette pulled up the notes she had typed. “I think it looks great. As per usual, you run a tight ship and keep everyone working. My only concern is your inventory.”

“What’s up with the inventory?” Gilga leaned against one of the shelving units. She scanned the shelves with interest.

Odette pulled up the images she took and pointed up to the top of the steel. Palletized items were wrapped and stored up high. “The pallets are safe but not well accounted for.”

“Those are just for feature quantity. There’s nothing expensive in them.” Gilga shrugged.

Odette couldn’t help the nagging feeling that if any other thieves were to exist, they’d start here. The storage room would be an easy way to stash and steal items. A maze of steel shelving and pallets. Powerlifting equipment honked in the background as distribution used the backroom as well. They shifted and moved things constantly when an online order or contract was made. Odette nibbled on the insides of her cheeks as she glanced around the steel.

“I would like to see your team pull them all down, recount, and re-bin all the pallets this week. No need to do it today but by the end of the week, I want an accurate count on everything up in the skies. And then get me an account of everything you found. Any discrepancies or even if it was all perfectly fine.” Odette typed into her file for Gilga the request she made. She made a shareable notebook for each of the department heads. They all had access to their own notebooks where they could see all the notes and feedback that Odette left for them.

Xena had all but refused to embrace the crystal tech. Instead, she insisted on texting them. Not to mention she stopped walking with Gilga and Odette about thirty minutes ago. She walked away without another word. Odette and Gilga continued without her.

“You got it! You want it in the notebook?” Gilga pulled out her phone to open the notes Xena left for her.

“Absolutely, and if you find anything alarming, feel free to tag Samosa in your accounts. But only if you find it necessary.” Odette snapped her fingers. Her crystal pad popped into her pocket dimension.

“Yeah, yeah, policy and blah.” Gilga huffed. “Does Xena really think my front endcaps look stupid?”

“She did not text you that!” Odette blurted out with exasperation.

Gilga held up her phone to show a few notes about how the displays weren’t drawing enough attention. Then in bold letters ‘**this endcap is stupid. Change it!**’. Odette smacked her forehead as Gilga broke into a fit of snorts and laughter. *Just when she couldn’t get more unprofessional!*

Odette groaned audibly, “Will you please add a screenshot of Xena’s notes into the notebook?”

“Already in there.”

“And disregard the comment. It’s a year-round modular. It’s supposed to look like that.” Odette rolled her eyes.

“I know. I was just going to ignore it,” Gilga snorted. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you Gilga. Please check your email for your scheduled eval and I look forward to seeing your account of the pallets.” Odette waved goodbye to Gilga, who sauntered back to the salesfloor.

Odette waited in the back room for a long moment. Rolling her ankles, enjoying the release from cracking her joints, she slumped back into a steel beam. *Finally, just a second of peace and quiet.* She’d walked more today than she ever did as a department head. Even though she spent many days on her feet for hours on end, somehow this was worse. Odette toed off her ankle boots and flexed her toes against the concrete. Sighing with pleasure, Odette put her hands on her lower back. She used the beam to stretch and rotate her hips and shoulders. Then she toed her boots back on.

“Hey, Boss lady!”

Her skin crawled and bones froze in her awkward bent position. Twisting her head to the side, she spotted Chatterbee at the end of the backroom shelving. Holding a massive dustmop, he waved at her with the goofiest grin on his face. Odette failed to smile back at him without grimacing. Her wave was pathetic. She fixed her face enough to face him fully. “Oh, hello Chatterbee, how are you?”

“Oh, you know, just doing a clean sweep, Boss Lady. What are you doing down here with the plebians?” Chatterbee chortled, his pig tusks clicking against the large piercings on his lips. Chatterbee was a mix of human and orc in the most unfortunate way. Peachey in flesh color with black tusks and skin flaps around his large nose. He kept his hair long and greasy in a low ponytail. Odette could recall at least three times she sent him to HR for personal hygiene alone.

Odette put her hands behind her back, knotting her fingers hard to keep the pain out of her face. She smiled her usual customer service smile.

“Just doing my rounds. Evals are right around the corner, must give every department head a piece of my mind. You know how it is.” She walked, almost robotically down the aisle of shelves. She rounded Chatterbee and tried to walk past him. A wall of putrid B.O. hit her nose.

Odette shut down her gut reaction to gag by pinching her palms as hard as she could. Pushing further into the hall, she nearly gasped for air. Then she heard Chatterbee pivot on his heel.

“Oh, wait, I wanted to ask.”

Odette’s eyes stung as she twirled to face him. She stepped back in the process. She hoped to get clean air. He grinned an awkward, lopsided smile. Leaning on his dustmop handle, he motioned at her with a gloved hand. “I didn’t know we were getting new locks.”

“What?” Odette sputtered.

“I saw Pucker putting in an order for new locks.” He shrugged.

“Well, when there’s a transition of power, there’s a policy that requires us to change the locks. We must upkeep the integrity of the leadership in this building.” Odette lied through her teeth with her customer service smile plastered on her face. She inhaled through her teeth. The taste was horrific. The stench would take hours to leave her nose hairs.

“Oh, so then that’s what Pucker and Xena were discussing this morning then? He kept saying ‘like we discussed yesterday’ or something.” Chatterbee cocked his head to the side.

Odette felt a spring within her sharply break. It audibly snapped inside her ears. Odette’s right eye twitched. She backed away as politely as she could. “Of course! A Vice President has to approve all budgets and in-house purchases.”

“Oh! Good, I was worried something happened.” Chatterbee attempted to follow.

“The only thing was our transition of power. But I’m glad to have answered your question, Chatterbee. I must be off; I have another department to walk today before I can start anything else. Get with your department head if you have any further questions.” Odette twisted around and charged forward as calmly as she could manage. Once she lost him in the steel shelves of the backroom, she rushed to the elevator. Her identification card slipped around in her hand. Slapping it wildly at the scanner, she gasped for air. The machine chimed over her head. She jumped into the elevator and shot up toward her floor.

The Chatterbee stench left her nose steadily as rage filled her to the brim. Goosebumps covered her arms. Every hair on the back of her neck jumped into place. The elevator dinged and the doors hissed open.

From the elevator, she could see Xena on a phone call in their office. She paced back and forth, twirling her massive sword. However, as Odette stepped out of the elevator, their eyes met. Xena froze from across the hall. The embellished atmosphere was decorated with crystals and frosted glass. Odette knew her face said everything. Her fists trembled with force as she didn't even walk into the office. Her body floated up over the hardwood and shot across the hall. Xena put her sword out in front of her, her phone call ended suddenly.

"How dare you!" Odette slammed the doors to their office open with a flash of her hands. She clapped her hands together and the doors hissed shut with a privacy spell. A bubble formed around their office. Odette vibrated with rage. Her voice turned an octave higher as her nails glowed with withheld magic. She felt the last thread of her decorum grow precariously thin. "How *dare* you go behind my back and speak with Pucker about a sensitive subject! I told you not to discuss it with him! I told you! I ordered you."

"What are you even shrieking about?" Xena readied her fighting stance. Her legs were firmly apart, thighs engaged with her broadsword in front of her. The anti-magic veins ran through the length of the blade.

"Guess who just cornered me in the sales backroom? Just guess," Odette spat.

"No," Xena exhaled with a worried expression.

"Oh yes! Chatterbee, once again, where he doesn't belong!" Odette tossed her hands out again. A pressure bomb of magic exploded between them. Xena flew into the windowpanes. Her back smacked into the enchanted glass with a hard *thwack*. She groaned loudly as she pulled away from the window. Odette stepped toward Xena. "And he told me that you and Pucker had a *discussion*!"

"We did, about the locks, like I told you." Xena slashed through the magical force field.

"Yesterday? Like you discussed Yesterday? Did you?" Odette felt the flames form around her right hand. She flung the fireball across the room. Xena cut through it and spun toward her. Odette danced out of the way of Xena's blows.

Xena sliced through layers of the floor and cut through the magic Odette put up around herself. Her small force field around her shattered inches from her face. Odette jumped forward, into Xena's personal space.

Planting a hand on the center of her exposed collarbone, her spell rocketed Xena across the room a second time. Blood trickled down Odette's left arm. A massive slice ran from one end of her bicep to her elbow. Xena crashed into the windowpanes again.

Odette pressed her palm against her arm. Xena tenderly prodded the back of her head. They stood in sluggish silence. Their eyes were glued to each other. Odette's rage thrummed through her with waves of pain and nausea. Then her knees buckled. Xena fell to her rump, sliding down the windowpanes to the floor. Odette muttered healing words to herself as the blood-soaked through her fingers and pooled on the floor. Xena rubbed and rolled her shoulders, ignoring the growing bruise on her collarbone.

"I don't take orders from you." Xena ground her knuckles against the floor. Her broadsword clinked against the floor as she set it across her lap.

"And you don't listen to reason, either." Odette removed her trembling hand from her arm. The blood loss left her woozy. She doubted she could stand even if she wanted. Odette pulled her skirts up around her waist to not soak them in blood. Then, using her already spilled blood, she drew symbols into the floor. Red lights whizzed up into the air. Her blood soaked into the wood without leaving a stain. The air in the office warmed as both their wounds were healed. Then she kicked off her heels.

"I asked if you liked my idea." Xena put the sword down next to her so that magic could soak in. Then she bent her knees and folded her arms over her knees.

"And I said no." Odette rubbed at her sore feet.

"Well, I liked my idea." Xena shrugged.

"Well, Chatterbee thinks something is up because he saw Pucker ordering and heard him and you discussing something. Which means you could have possibly ruined the investigation completely." Odette pressed into the arch of her feet.

"Why do you even wear heels if they hurt your feet?" Xena blurted out.

"I'm fine, no thanks to you leaving the walk halfway through," Odette sneered. "And stop changing the subject when you're in trouble."

"In trouble?" Xena rolled her eyes.

"Two days into the job and you obviously can't handle it. You're too personable, once again. Face it, you're not cut out for Vice President." Odette climbed to her feet before pulling her boots back onto her feet. "And I like the way they complement my outfit. That's why I wear them."

“So, you can feel taller.” Xena hoisted herself back up to her feet.

“I am perfectly fine at my height.” Odette stomped to her desk. Pulling out her recharged opal, she pressed it to her forehead. Soft waves of calming lavender and relaxation poured into her from the stone. She rubbed it in slow circles against her skin.

“At least I don’t make people fear opening up to me. Ice queen.” Xena took up her broad sword and swung it back into place. Her holster sat on her back, strapped with leather across her chest.

“I’d rather be an ice queen than a mistake.” Odette pulled the stone away from her forehead. The pressure of their privacy bubble eased as the spell faded away. Odette couldn’t be bothered to put it back up. Her forehead throbbed. “It’s more professional.”

“You know what, don’t bother going on the last tour today. You stay in here and work on paperwork like you’re good at, I’ll walk with Marc.”

“What? Why? So you can go and goof off with your battle buddy while I work on the mountains of paperwork we’re supposed to complete together?” Odette tossed her opal into the drawer and smacked it shut. She whirled to face Xena already storming off. “You’re not even going to evaluate him fairly!”

“I’m more fair than you!” Xena roared from the hallway.

Odette scoffed, ready to stomp after her. But her legs wobbled from use and shock, sinking into her seat. Realistically, she ought to follow her and ensure the eval was fair. *Not that Xena cared for fairness for any of the other departments.* Grumbling to herself, she pulled out another stack of HR paperwork. Odette flipped through it, signing and initially. The anger subsided to irritation as the sounds of voices downstairs floated up toward her. She couldn’t tell who it was or what they were saying. The whole building buzzed with life. Odette flapped her hand at the door. It clicked shut. She sighed in relief at the total silence of the office.

Rubbing her temples, she was forced to give up writing. Her fingers pressed into her skin. She tried not to give in. Eventually, she kicked off her boots a third time and snapped her fingers. A piece of gum dropped in front of her. She popped it into her mouth and chewed aggressively.

Their match was only a taste. She could only imagine how a real fight might end. Xena knew how to fight mages and could take a beating. Odette was certain she would win but it would take killing Xena to win. Odette spit out the gum. *It already lost its flavor.*

Movement across the hall caught her eye. She peered up to see Evelyn floating out of the elevator. Evelyn glanced up from the elevator floor to meet Odette's eyes. She held up a picnic basket with a huge wave. Odette smiled weakly and waved for her to come inside the office. Evelyn zipped across the hall, basket in tow. The glass doors opened with a breath of air, allowing the sounds of the building inside the office.

"Figured you were swamped so I thought I might bring lunch to you." Evelyn shrugged, a sheepish blush across her cheeks. Baby's breath sprouted out of her hair in batches.

"That sounds magical, thank you," Odette murmured. She popped out of her desk, finally steady on her feet. Evelyn set down the basket and unfolded a blanket from the top of it. Odette pulled out the paper plates and utensils. Sitting down across from Evelyn, Odette could hear the words 'ice queen' repeated in her skull. Was she truly that distant and emotionally unavailable to her subordinates? She peered up at Evelyn with worry. "Do you think I'm an Ice Queen?"

"What?" Evelyn choked on her own laughter as she pulled out a can of soda. "In what way? I've never seen you summon ice."

Odette chuckled as she took a soda of her own. The fizzy drink soothed her raw throat more than tea could. She set it aside. "Do you think I'm emotionally distant and hard to approach for my subordinates?"

"Am I really the best one to ask?" Evelyn cocked her head to the right. Yellow lily petals flipped out from under the baby's breath. Tiny white petals fell to the floor around her.

"You used to be a peer, and now you're currently my subordinate, so I'd say so. If no one gives me feedback on my attitude, how will I grow as a leader? How can I help grow you as a leader? If you never tell me what you need?" Odette picked a small handful of chips out of a baggy in the basket. Evelyn bit into a sandwich too massive for her face. Odette munched quietly to herself as she mewled over Evelyn and the comment from Xena.

"Well, some of us won't sugar coat it." Evelyn dabbed her mouth clear with a napkin.

"Gilga, Marc, you." Odette counted on her fingers.

"And some of us don't talk about our emotions period." Evelyn finally landed upon the blanket. Her wings finally settled on her back.

“Are you talking about Jonas in accounting? He told me he was very elated at the yule ball last year.” Odette popped another chip in her mouth.

“Did he *look* elated?” Evelyn raised her right brow.

“Now that you say it, I’ve never seen him express said emotions.” Odette pursed her lips as she searched in her head. She found herself unable to find a single instance, in the three years she knew Jonas, where he smiled. He didn’t even flinch. *Always staring blankly ahead.* Odette shivered as she imagined him sitting there, unblinking, breathing through his open mouth.

“I find some people perceive you one way because that’s all they’ve ever seen. Some have seen other sides. It depends on where your defensive layer is, you know?” Evelyn took up her sandwich again. Odette found her own sandwich in the basket. Tucking her legs under herself, she munched with Evelyn in peaceful silence.

“I don’t want to seem estranged, or distant but if I’m not professional I can’t be a good boss,” Odette confessed over the top of her peanut butter and honey sandwich. Thick honey from enchanted bees made everything better. Plus, the peanut butter had little chunks in it to break up the soft bread taste. Odette took a swig of her soda as her mouth was caked in peanut butter.

“You can still be professional and yourself. Is this about the comment I made about you not being the old Odette? I was a little mean, I didn’t mean for it to come out so spiteful, but I was angry at a lot of what I’d seen that morning. Clara sure knows how to make a social hissy fit.” Evelyn stared at Odette with apologetic eyes.

“Something different, but I appreciate the honesty. As for Clara, there is nothing I can do to counteract her social media tirade. I’ve just been avoiding anything but work recently.” Odette tapped her fingers against the outside of her can.

“Maybe you should try going out,” Evelyn kicked out her tiny legs in front of her. “Not like her, per se, but maybe just go out to have a good time. Hit up a bookstore, maybe go to a pub, and eat some greasy food. Something like that to get you out of the house.”

Odette set her can down. Evelyn returned to her lunch, but she made a good point. Odette liked being a homebody but recently... being home didn’t feel relaxing. Instead, it stressed her more to see an empty nest. She’d always liked a quiet home but now it was deafening. Rufus even

seemed restless without Clara's noise. The closet was significantly emptier and her bathroom more organized. *Hollow*. Maybe she was right, a night out to get warm food and a new book might be nice. Plus, there was a pub in the city that let her bring Rufus if she sat on the patio.

Chapter Five:

“I’m telling you, Minx, she holds a grudge like no one I’ve ever met.” Xena tossed back her beer. She spent most of the afternoon fixing the barn door at the farm. After Dinah tucked everyone in, she went out for food and a beer.

Two days ago, Odette and Xena started a match that Xena thought was over. Neither won, but as far as Xena was concerned, they’d worked it out. Yet the day that followed was silent and subtly aggressive. Odette backed into her parking space so Xena couldn’t block her in. She scribbled loudly, wore strong perfume, and refused to even look Xena in the eye. They were supposed to have a meeting with Grecia over video call soon. Xena could only imagine how sour Odette would be to her then. Grecia wanted to discuss the process of getting them an assistant. One they would have to share. As per company policy, the vice president and president only got one assistant. Xena tossed out names left and right and Odette shut them down.

If Odette was trying to make Xena quit, her petty attitude wasn’t working. Her snooty emotions only drove Xena to fight harder.

“Maybe you should apologize.” Minx shrugged as he cleaned out multiple drink glasses.

“Whose side are you on?” Xena spat as she set the glass down.

“I don’t know, you didn’t tell me what happened, just that she was pissed with you. Knowing you and what you’ve told me about her, seems your breathing made her angry.” Minx picked up a new glass, twirling it around his bar towel as he dried it. A slow night at Mumford’s with Minx as the only bartender. The kitchen stayed open, but generally in the middle of the week no one came in. Xena liked the peace and quiet as Minx did busy work.

“It was something work-related.” Xena had learned her lesson. *Keep that big mouth shut.* Now that she was a big wig, instead of a pee-on, it made a difference who knew details. Xena wasn’t used to having to take the bigger picture in mind. She wasn’t used to many things. *Things she should have been trained to do.*

“Ah, well then did you do something bad?” Minx raised a brow.

“I did what I wanted; she didn’t like that. Now she won’t talk to me. And I thought we had just settled it, I mean, why did we fight if she didn’t want it settled like that?” Xena twirled her beer bottle against the counter. The foamy liquid wasn’t hitting the same spot today. Instead of bliss and happiness, Xena felt worse than she had this morning. Xena pulled out her phone and stared at the screen. The morning before their fight it seemed almost like they might be friends. Sharing photos of animals, laughing with each other. ... *it was nice*. Because nice Odette was ‘fun weird’ and not a killjoy. Angry Odette was an ice queen.

“Well, haven’t you been trying to fight her this whole time? Why not just go level the playground with her face?” Minx twisted to set the drink glasses against the back shelf.

“Of course, I want to fight her! I love fighting! It’s just, not like this. I don’t want to fight her like this. This feels like no matter who wins, no one truly wins. I want us to fight because we want to, with honor and everything. But this is angry, hurt the other person for no reason, fighting. It’s not honorable nor is it fun. It should be a battle, not a war.” Xena leaned her chin into her hand as she pushed her beer away from her. Her stomach rolled uncomfortably as she stared across the bar at the chalkboard. “What’s the new competition?”

“Whoever can get the cup.” Minx pointed to the rafters. Hung from the ceiling on a delicate string hung a plain coffee mug.

“You can’t just jump and grab it?” Xena crossed her arms over the bar top.

“Nope, the rule is anything but your hands or toes and no actual weapons. So, throw stuff, whip towels at it. The number on the board is how many attempts we’ve made. I’ve got three. The less tries the better. But I might have to give up on not trying and just wing it. Victory is better than nothing, right?” Minx chortled as he returned to the front of the bar.

“What have you tried so far?” Xena eyed the mug, then the cooks in the rafters.

“Tried a sharp pen, someone let me borrow their bill fold, and I’ve whipped at it with a bar towel. No good.” Minx leaned over the bar and checked the bottle Xena had for content. When he found it half-full, he placed it back down. “Want to try? I’ll put you on the board for it.” Minx pointed at the cup.

“No thanks,” Xena sighed.

“Xena Battlemoar stepping down from a challenge? What has that company done to you?” Minx teased with a gentle prod to her forearm.

“It’s hard. Way harder than I imagined the job would be, in a way that seems stupid but is super true. I am in charge of so many people doing so many things and I also have to be available for CEO and Shareholder meetings, I have to respond to Ash, or really Grecia. I have to approve practically everything, investigate everything, know the business in and out and it’s... more than I imagined.” Xena poked at the side of her beer bottle. It stood tall, mocking her at this point. Xena snatched up her beer bottle and threw it back. Downing all the foamy liquid did little to calm the storm in her gut. She dried her mouth with the back of her hand. “Ash never broke a sweat. So how did she do this? By herself too.”

“It’s a lot.” Minx nodded.

“I wasn’t trained to do this job, Minx.” Xena handed Minx the empty bottle.

“I find that happens all too much in the world.” Minx recycled the bottle. “You want another?”

“No, I’m good. I should probably go home.” Xena pushed away from the bar.

The front door to the pub opened and Tilla, the dishwasher and all-around second pair of hands, popped her head in. “Minx, I got a customer on the patio. I need a firecracker wing and an apple ale, frosty, please. Oh, and a blue steak? Not cooked, just moo.”

“The patio? It’s the dead of winter, who is sitting out in this weather?” Xena scoffed. King’s Fall would never look it, but it was the middle of winter. Never enough clouds to snow or ice over since the forbidden forest wrapped them in a bubble of natural magic. That magic kept the roads clear and the skies in a perfect blue most days. But the temperature, especially when the sun was down, hit low into the blue toes category. Xena looked through the stained-glass windows of the aged bar and furrowed her brow. A massive flame sat on the other side, dancing on the patio. “Oh, this ought to be good.”

“What?” Minx poured the ale into a massive frosty mug.

“Give me that, I’ll deliver it. If it’s who I think it is, I’ll pay the tab.” Xena grinned from ear to ear.

“And why would you do that?” Minx set the mug on the bar top for Xena.

“Because I might break a chair or two and I’ll have to buy your love for it.” Xena launched into action. She opened the door with her rear. Bitter air clawed into her exposed forearms. Yet, as she pivoted toward the open patio of Mumford’s, she knew she wouldn’t be cold for long. There, in the middle of the patio, on a leash tangled around the table base was the biggest hell hound known to magic kind. Floppy ears, fluffy fur on fire, and gnawing on a rubber ball in a blue sweater with boots on.

“Your dog is even more ridiculous in person.” Xena stepped over the tiny wooden gate that surrounded the patio. Sat at the table with a massive tomb and a bag from some shop within the town, was Odette. In a leather jacket over a sheer blouse and jeans, she even wore snow boots that matched Rufus’. Rufus scrambled to his feet, tongue lolling out of his face.

Rufus barked a deep, rumbling bark. Odette glanced up from her book as Xena spoke. But it wasn’t until Rufus’ hair stood on end that she spoke. “Down Rufus.” And down the dog went. Settling by her feet, filling the underside of the table with blue flames.

“How do you keep him from turning his sweaters to ash?” Xena set the frosty mug down on the wooden table.

“I use sweaters for fire genasi.” Odette furrowed her brow. “What are you doing here?”

“I was trying to drink myself into a stupor,” Xena snorted.

“Typical Knight.” Odette rolled her eyes.

“I was being sarcastic.” Xena folded her hands over the table.

“I wasn’t.” Odette slid the mug closer to her. Taking it up, she took a soft sip then lowered it. Rufus immediately sat up and dunked his whole snout in the ale. Xena spotted the winter-decorated mug beside Odette’s book. She took up her steaming mug in one hand while she motioned with her other hand at the ale. “The ale’s good. Rufus prefers apple to regular beer.”

“The dog drinks ale?” Xena sat back in the wooden chair. She crossed a leg over the other.

“Loves it, actually.” Odette set the mug down. “Do you work here on your off days or are you just loitering?”

“My best friend is the owner here, Minx.” Xena jabbed a thumb in the direction of the doors.

“That’s a shame, I liked the patio here.” Odette sighed. She rummaged to her jacket pockets. Pulling out cash, she slid it across the table at Xena. “Let them know the food won’t be necessary. I’ll leave.”

“Whoa, you’re leaving?” Xena shot to her feet. Odette froze midrise. Their eyes locked together.

“Why are you asking literally everything I say?” Odette frowned.

“Why would you leave, you just got here. And the wings are amazing.” Xena motioned at the stained-glass windows that framed the outside of Mumford’s.

“Because it’s your place. And unlike you, I try not to upset people in their space.” Odette reached for the leash bound around the table.

“Name one time I’ve done that.” Xena placed her right-hand flat on the tabletop.

“The parking garage.” Odette untied the leash and stood up fully.

“That hardly counts, those are just parking spots and they’re not named, just reserved. Name a real one.” Xena stepped out in front of the walkway next to the table. Odette glared up at her. For a long moment, they stood in absolute silence. Then Odette huffed and sat back down in her seat. Xena smirked, “See, that’s what I thought.”

“Why are you trying to get me to stay?” Odette crossed a leg over the other and tossed her right hand out with exasperation.

“Like I said, my best friend owns it.” Xena sat back down. Folding her hands in her lap, she rolled her sleeves back down. Unlike inside where it was naturally warm, here the air was frosty. Except where Rufus was, as he illuminated the whole patio and raised it at least twenty degrees. The dog licked his chops happily as he emptied the whole mug. Xena pointed at Rufus.

“He likes it frosty, cools down his muzzle.” Odette took up the mug and set it on the table. “And what? You want to show your best friend the coworker you hate most?”

“I want you to like something I like.” Xena shrugged.

“Why in the magic hell would you want that?” Odette scoffed.

“Because then you can’t scoff at my tastes in food or restaurants because we like the same places.” Xena cracked her knuckles and flashed a smirk.

“Whatever mind game you’re playing, it won’t work.” Odette crossed her arms. She tapped her fingers across her bicep. They continued their

staring contest until a pane in the windows clicked open. A yellow basket of wings floated out into the sky with a plate of uncooked steak. Odette took up the plate and plopped the raw meat onto the ground. Rufus immediately dug into it, growling, and ripping it to shreds. She sheepishly chuckled, "He likes the thrill of the kill."

"Adorable." Xena watched the hellhound bounce and fling the steak. Blood splashed the concrete but stayed away from them. As if he knew better. Xena figured he probably did. Her attention returned to Odette who daintily bit into a wing with a napkin in her lap.

"I will give you credit, these are amazing." Odette took up a swig of her tea before biting further into the wing. Xena sat back in the seat, torn between watching Rufus 'kill' his dinner and Odette trying not to get sauce on her face. Both ate unashamed of their appetite. Xena slid to her feet making Odette jump in her skin as she glanced up at her. "Where are you going?"

"To grab me a beer, does the mutt need more ale?" Xena nodded at Rufus.

"No, I'm trying not to die. If he gets too much barley in his diet, he farts worse than that swamp monster did in the lobby." Odette shook her head.

"I almost forgot about that," Xena chuckled, shaking her own head. Years ago, a beast got loose from one of the research departments. It covered the whole building in goo and stank up every corner of every room. Then it exploded into farts in the lobby when someone tried to tranquilize it. Xena rubbed her nose in memory of it. "You want anything?"

"No, my tea is fine. I doubt they have wine." Odette shook her head.

"You'd be surprised. Let me guess, you drink rose'?" Xena pursed her lips as she scanned over Odette's features.

"Isn't it a bit cold to drink, anyway?" Odette waved the comment off.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Xena pivoted on her heel. The cold hit her bones the second she left Rufus and his warmth. The doors opened without having to be touched. Minx watched with eager delight as Xena crossed the main floor.

"So, I guess by the way you're back here and my patio isn't ruined that it wasn't she who must not be named?" Minx wiggled his eyebrows and whiskers at the same time.

“It was, but surprisingly, she didn’t want to hex me. I need another beer for me and a glass of rose’ for her.” Xena pulled out her billfold and slapped cash onto the counter. “And maybe another bucket of wings, but just medium for me. I’m not trying to have acid reflux tonight.”

“You got it.” Minx saluted her before wheeling around the bar. He dropped off a glass of pink liquid and another glass bottle of beer for Xena. The cooks were already half done with the wings before she brushed through the door a second time. Xena thought for a moment that Odette and Rufus would be gone. But when she stepped over the knee height wooden gate, she found them right where she left them. Rufus lay down, licking his paws and the bloody concrete with his flat tongue. Odette dabbed her cheeks with a napkin.

“One glass of I know your type.” Xena set the glass down before Odette.

“I’m going to hate it anyway, so it doesn’t matter if you know I like rose’.” Odette snatched the glass. She swirled it around before her and even took a soft whiff of it. Staring down into it, as if it would tell her secrets, she sloshed it a bit more. Then she set it down. “What did you poison it with?”

“I don’t know what Warlocks like to do on their time off, but I don’t poison good alcohol, it’s sacrilegious.” Xena took a swig of her beer. Rufus peered up from the concrete with his massive puppy eyes. He blinked at her and licked his chops. Xena shook her head, “Nope, mom said no more, sorry buddy.”

“I’m not a warlock.” Odette put the glass to her lips and sipped the rose’ gingerly. She pouted deeper as she took a bigger sip. Then she set it down. “And it could be better. A little weak flavor.”

“Sorry Minx doesn’t have designer brand wine.” Xena spotted the window click open and her wings floating out. She took them out of the sky and ripped into one immediately. Her stomach settled completely.

“Doesn’t have to be expensive, just good.” Odette shrugged as she dried off her fingers.

“Do you have to belittle everything I do for you?” Xena jabbed a wing bone in Odette’s direction.

“Do you have to be such a nuisance?” Odette countered, picking up her wine glass. She sat back and sipped it slowly. Her wings were mostly finished. Odette let one hand fall off her chair and scratch down Rufus’

back. He wiggled happily under her hand, his back foot kicking. She ruffled the top of his head for good measure.

“So, what are you?” Xena took a swig of beer to clear her throat.

“Sensitivity training.” Odette rolled her eyes.

“No, you’re not sensitivity training either,” Xena snickered before clearing the air with her hands. “I meant, if you’re not a warlock, what kind of spellcaster are you? You don’t carry a spell book so you’re not a witch or wizard. And clerics don’t come from warlock academy.”

“Oh. I’m a sorcerer... sorceress, would be the best term. My magic stems from ancestral history. My great, great grandmother on my mother’s side was the sugar plum fairy.” Odette’s face lit up with glee as she sat forward. Setting her wine down, she pushed her basket aside. She put her hands to the table as if to draw it out on the wooden surface. “So, you see, it’s funny, my last name is plum but not because of her. My father’s name has been plum, and so was his father’s. No one knows where it came from. But when my mom met him at the academy as a healer practitioner, she said it’s ironic that he’s a plum because she’s a plum fairy. And he was like, ‘who is the sugar plum fairy?’ and so my mother had to give the general casting professor at the academy a history lesson on Fae warfare and general Sugar Plum.” Odette ended with a chuckle.

Xena blinked, half a swig of beer in her mouth and the glass still pressed against her lips. She sat the glass down. Swallowing, she dried her mouth with the back of her hand. “Wait. No!”

“Yeah!” Odette brimmed, waves of light purple magic washing over the patio. A hazy mist decorated the air around her. “Isn’t it cool? I’ve always loved my mother’s family tree. My father is a human warlock, so his side of the family is pretty boring. But my mother’s is full of rich history and magic.”

Xena fell silent as she stared at Odette in awe. “Well, that’s not fair.”

“What is?” Odette furrowed her brows.

“I want to be related to a war hero. Like, imagine how much more bragging rights I would have at the gym if I did!” Xena grinned.

Odette groaned loudly and rolled her eyes. “Gym rats are all the same.”



Odette landed her teleportation spell at the gates of Warlock Academy of Deathcraft. A building that should not physically stand nor house people, yet still exists. Its mere survival was due to the countless years of magic that sculpted this monstrosity. A four-story castle built with spires and towers that sprout for no reason at odd angles. Gargoyles floated nearby the three astronomy towers. They stood tall with massive orbs on top and did not connect to the castle by anything other than a whirlpool portal. Whirlpool portals look like a deathtrap and constantly churn up sick students into the base of the astronomy tower. To fully appreciate this horrific building, imagine a toddler drawing a castle from memory... now erase half the lines. That is Warlock Academy. The most prestigious school for warlock spellcasting.

Odette stood at the gate, putting her palm to the red orb inside a stone dragon's mouth. Sculpted mid-flight, the iron dragon flew a few feet out of the rocky earth. Mouth wrenched open wide with the red orb placed inside. Odette's eyes dropped from the orb to the earth around her. Patches of green clover covered the ground around her feet. Hints of rosemary and thyme floated down from the gardens that hung upside-down along the top of the fence. Droplets of dew sprinkled her cheeks as the gate creaked open.

"Welcome Home, Odette Plum," The ominous voice growled from inside the dragon's mouth.

"Good to be back." Odette faked a smile as she stepped through the gate. It swung shut behind her with a racket that echoed off the boulders nearby. The Warlock Academy also sat on the rockiest hill they could find back in the old days. Far away from the hustle and bustle of King's Fall, the Warlock Academy stood on the hillsides past the forbidden forest. The iron gate and rickety lock on it didn't seem like much protection to the naked eye. But Odette could attest that the magic protecting the academy was intense. From personal experience of running into the force field enough at a maximum speed many times.

"Is that Odette?" Like gophers, children appeared from everywhere along the property. Wintertime tended to be the vacation season for the

school. This meant that only children with nowhere to go and the families of teachers stayed on the grounds. Odette froze as they slithered out of hiding spots into the light. As young as three or as old as eighteen, the Warlock academy accepted anyone who walked the path of the warlock. “Miss Odette Plum! Headmaster’s daughter!”

Odette knelt and allowed the younger children to pummel her. She embraced the force of their affection and let them gather around her. About fourteen children lingered around her as she stood back up. The girl hanging in her arms couldn’t be older than five. Her round face curled up in a smile. Odette hugged her close as she let the others lead her across the massive yard of the academy. As a child, she never understood what it meant to have a school open for children of any age. When she grew up and her father fully explained what warlocks were, she understood.

A warlock is a spellcaster who has sold something of themselves to a deity, source of magic, or higher being who gives them power in exchange. Often adults will choose to willingly become Warlocks for some reason or another. However, children are more likely to be lured into a contract that they are unable to know the full consequences. Warlocks have power that can change kingdoms and governments, but at what price?

Odette let the girl in her arms down at the massive doors to the academy. She giggled and bound through the opening doors with glee. Along the back of her neck, Odette could see the runes engraved into her flesh. Odette’s stomach dropped to her feet. The others babbled at her without any direction of all their individual stories. Odette waited for there to be some dip in their stories to excuse herself inside. Once upon a time, her father asked her to work with him at the school. Her lack of patience and temper played into her disdain for teaching. The other reason was the gnawing feeling in her gut at seeing children displaced inside the school.

“Ah! Odette, I thought I sensed your magic.” Ebbers, one of the professors at the academy, peered up from a huge tomb of recipes. Potions and lotions, mostly edible while some were not as tasty, were his specialty. Odette beamed as he opened an arm to her. She gave him a side hug before stealing a glance at his book.

“Trying to take over the kitchens again, I see.” She lifted the cover enough to scan the title.

The castle’s interior mirrored its exterior. Wild and chaotic architecture with no rhyme or reason. Architects have nightmares about

the inside of the academy. Stairs that lead nowhere while there are stone beams and archways that students use to climb about. Slides hung from stone rafters that do not touch the ground but lead to portals. Despite the lofty and airy stone build of the academy, warmth radiated around them. Nutmeg and earthy smells wafted up out of a hallway further down to the left.

“Trying to take over your company again, I see.” Ebbbers prodded her with his elbow. “How’s being a big wig?”

“Oh, you know, it’s a bit wild and chaotic and frustrating.” Odette shrugged with a bemused smile on her lips.

“So, typical for us.” Ebbbers shrugged. They both broke out into mad laughter. Odette enjoyed Ebbbers’ class, always so excited to teach. A great fit for the school, as he enjoyed being asked stupid questions every second and repeating himself. Anything to see children learn. Odette could never be that excited about teaching children how to stir a cauldron. After patching up her sisters for blisters around unwatched homework, she knew this wouldn’t be her life.

The young girl scrambled up to them and tugged on Odette’s pant legs. Odette knelt and accepted a handful of moist acorns out of her pockets. She swallowed hard as the girl skipped away. Then she promptly stuffed the acorns into Ebbbers’ open palm. Dusting her palms off on his robes, she gagged silently to herself. Odette pointed at the five-year-old, Ebbbers pushed her finger away with a shake of his head. Her question was already answered with a solemn expression on his face.

“We’ve named her Sugar because she’s so sweet.” Ebbbers smiled through the sadness in his eyes.

Odette swallowed the swell of pain. *She didn’t even have a name before the academy.* She waved her hand flippantly to cover up the higher octave her voice took. “Can we give people normal names, for once?” Odette rolled her eyes.

“Your mother is physically unable to name anyone a regular name like Rufus.” Ebbbers closed his tomb and tucked it into the pocket of his robes. Upon touching the fabric, the book disappeared into a pocket dimension. He dropped the acorns in there as well. He dusted his own hands on the outside of his robes. “Where is the rascal?”

“He’s at home, sleeping off the ale and raw steak he got last night at a pub.” Odette and Ebbbers followed the gaggle of children. The chimes of

dinner bells rang over their heads. Odette scanned the rafters as fluttering wings dove in and out of view. She stretched her neck to peer into empty halls and rooms as they headed for the mess hall at the center of the Academy. Everything seemed settled and dusty without daily use. “Where is everyone else?”

“Well, Charming is here staying through the winter till he can head south and start up his research again. Aurora was here, but she’s been up in the towers painting, something? I’m not sure. Most of the professors went home for the break but you’ve got me, Bernard, Katie, and of course, your parents are here.” Ebbers counted off on his fingers all the staff that stayed. Aurora and Charming were some of Odette’s siblings, but all the Plum children were treated like honorary staff. Being raised in the academy made them a special guest at dinner time.

It had been too long since she’d come here.

But Odette hadn’t wanted to come over for *just* dinner. She wanted to get out of her apartment again on her other day off. A trace of Clara permeated the walls and her chest ached. When she was at work, it was almost like it never happened. She was too busy to hurt or mourn or regret the relationship. Her mind ran a million miles a minute while in Knights&Mage. But the second she returned home in hopes of sitting down and destressing, she found her stomach tied in knots. The couch wasn’t comfy anymore and the bed was too cold. Even with Rufus forced to sleep next to her, it didn’t cut it. He stopped fighting her picking him up and plopping him on the mattress after a few days. Last night he bound up there on his own and breathed stale ale breath on her face all night. Thanks to Xena, he drank at least another mug.

Odette tried not to mowl it over too much because she was still angry at Xena. For some reason, she enjoyed sitting out on the patio with the giant buffoon. They talked about the were-rescue more and Rufus’ feeding habits. Then Xena seemed interested in her family history more, something Odette could blabber for hours about. Xena talked very little about her family, which only made Odette feel guilty about going on and on about hers. Yet, she didn’t think Xena minded. They were supposed to be making the other quit or worse! After last night, however, Odette felt less mad.

“How does the Vice President have the time to come home on her first week?” Her father’s chuckle bounced out of the mess hall to greet her.

Odette rounded the doorway to the large ballroom full of oddly shaped tables with mismatched chairs at every table. *They never had the money to buy all the same things at the same time.* Her father stepped out from behind a table and walked up to his daughter. Odette wrapped her arms around him. He was older in the face, his goatee turned into a full beard. Salt and pepper hair that was longer on top and curled at the ends with no effort.

The Mess Hall didn't change a single bit. The massive room withheld several tables and chairs with a church-style vaulted ceiling. Three large windows with no glass but stone lattice filled in the space. Fireflies and actual fireballs danced around the room to provide warmth. The golden chandelier that swung above with about thirty candles dripped wax above their heads. After a while, students learned to move the tables about till the wax only dripped on the floor. *Or they merely ignored it.*

"Unfortunately, Xena works today and I'm off. She's off tomorrow and I work. We get two days off but only one is the same day where Ash is supposed to be on call. With her out and Grecia with her, pretty much I've been on my email all day. It's why I couldn't get here earlier." Odette squeezed her father tightly. She didn't mention how she couldn't feel comfortable going out where there was no crystal network until after Knights&Mage had closed for the day. She sent maybe a hundred emails today from her bed. Mostly to remind Xena to do things and her responding with 'I know, stop emailing me.'

"Micromanaging much." Her mother chirped from the other side of her father. Her mother stood a head shorter than her husband but looked as radiant as ever. Round face with a button nose, dressed in a simple purple baby doll dress and flats. Her iridescent wings fluttered as Odette closed her arms around her mother. Pearl dust tickled Odette's cheeks and throat.

"I just can't trust she will remember everything." Odette winced as her mother cupped her cheeks.

"If you were both promoted, then it was for a reason. Relax and enjoy, we made roast beast for dinner with those honey rolls you like." Her mother kissed her on the forehead. Then she wheeled her toward the long oak table where Charming, her brother, slept on the surface. "Tom, love, please, stop transforming the cooked beast into a dinner show, it's going to get sauce everywhere."

“But Aphrodite, my love, look what I can do!” Her father waved his hands, making the forty-pound roasted beast stand up from the platter it was on and dance. Tom Plum and Aphrodite Plum tossed spells back and forth as the other children watched in awe. Odette’s mother countered every spell Tom put on the meat so she could carve and serve the dinner. Tom made the chunks of food dance on the children’s plates.

Odette changed her attention from her parents to the slumbering man against the staff table. Her brother was the spitting image of her dad. No facial hair or broad shoulders, but the curls and wicked smile were a genetic trait.

Odette pulled out her chair softly, sat down steadily, and folded her hands onto the table. She waited a solid three seconds then swiftly jerked her hands up and slammed them onto the table. The board under Charming’s left cheek snapped up and tossed her brother out of his seat and into the concrete floors. Children erupted in laughter. Propping himself up off the floor, Charming pointed a finger at his sister. Purple magic in a slimy orb shape flew at her face. Odette flopped out of the way before his magic slapped against the far wall. Sticky goop trailed down the wall much in the way snot travels out of a toddler’s nose. Leaving purple slime in its wake and grossing out everyone who saw it. Charming arched his back and then flipped to his feet with cat-like agility. Odette stayed hidden under the cover of the table.

“Face me you, coward.” Charming armed himself with more putrid purple orbs.

“Not when you use gross magic like a child.” Odette popped a hand up above the table’s edge. She flipped him off before pointing that finger at him. “*Levitate.*”

Jerked up by the back of his belt loop, Charming shrieked in terror. Odette popped her head up from under the table and flung her brother across the room. He collected himself enough to grab the chandelier and dangle from it for a moment. Hesitantly, he walked down the air like there were steps. “Real Mature, Odette, scaring a man while he takes a nap.”

“Lesson one was never allow yourself to be snuck up on.” Odette brimmed from ear to ear. Her brother stepped onto the concrete before opening his arms. Odette scooped him up into her arms. He squeezed hard enough to crack her lower back. She groaned, “Ow, but thanks.”

“Since I know you sit like a wood elf at work.” He swiftly ducked a saliva-soaked finger in her ear while he could. She wrenched backward enough to bring her knee up to her torso. Then Odette donkey kicked him hard in the thigh. He gasped for air as his knee gave out.

“Learned that move at K&M.” Odette hoisted her brother up by the right arm.

“You’ll have to teach me that before you go,” Charming wheezed for air. “Hurts worse than getting knocked in the groin.”

Odette cackled as they sat back down at the table. The roast beast landed on their plates with gravy in their mini scuffle. He ripped meat off the bone with his fingers. Odette used her fork, filling her mouth with food. They moaned with delight in unison. Odette flopped back against her seat. She took up the large goblet that filled with sparkling juice upon her touch. Charming and she clinked glasses before sipping their drinks. Odette melted in the atmosphere. Soft murmurs of children eating and talking filled the air. Ebbers eventually sat at the staff table with her father while her mother sat with a larger table of small children. She cut up their food for them and worked with them on table manners.

“Hey, I heard about Clara-” Charming’s face fell as he glanced up at Odette. She shot him a sharp expression.

“So, what’s the research project this season?” Odette jerked to life, interrupting him. Her gaze bore through him, and he sighed. He understood, without saying another word. He dropped it. Odette pulled apart a roll without glancing at it. The warm, buttery bread oozed with drizzled honey. She bit into the golden bread, swaying with glee at the taste. Food eased the tension in her shoulder.

“They’ve backed our research into the slime dragon. There have been a lot of attacks up north where it’s more urban and residential. And the toxins are getting bad. They’ve fully evacuated the city of Knoqen.” Charming nibbled along the bone of his beast wing. Then he settled it on his plate. Drying his hands on the napkin under his untouched silverware. “They want us to start with an anti-toxin, but of course, in order to do that, we need access to a direct source. And then they have our other team studying the eating and breeding habits of the dragons. See if we can redirect them or if we’ve got to give up the city altogether.”

Odette let out a soft whistle and shook her head. “Slime dragon’s are a nasty breed.”

“Is it because of the mucus?” Charming snickered.

“That and the poison breath and the way they look and their general attitude. It’s everything really.” Odette threw a chunk of her bread at her brother’s face. He caught it in the air with his mouth. She tossed another. He fumbled with the second one. Honey collected on his right cheek where the piece smacked him.

“Why don’t you choose a safe occupation like your sister?” Tom sighed. He cut into his beast with his knife and fork but picked up the chunk he cut with his fingers. Ebbers and Odette shared a roll of their eyes. Both used their silverware to cut into more of their food.

“Ah, yes, the corporate sell out.” Charming kicked at Odette from under the table.

Odette kicked him back. “I make good money helping run a wonderful company. If that makes me a sell-out, then so be it.” Odette shrugged.

“So it has been,” Charming snorted.

“Funny.” Odette tossed another chunk of bread at his face. He caught it again.

“Admit it, no company is ethical. I mean, you experiment on people in your research department. And animals!” Charming crossed his arms.

“Progress is not an easy thing. You wouldn’t have a job trying to save species if it weren’t for research *on* species.” Odette waved off his comment.

“Okay, how about the Knight program?” Charming prodded her arm with his pointer finger.

“These people sign up to be trained and then employed in these contracts. No one is forced to be a knight. People need security and there is always a need for a strong, dependable force of fighters or even barbarians. They get good pay, and benefits, and are independent contractors so if they want to go somewhere else after their third year of work for us, they can. Plenty of people stay for their full employment because of how good we are.” Odette cocked a brow in his direction.

“And I bet your storefront staff says they enjoy their pay and benefits too?” Tom smirked.

“If I wanted to be attacked, I would have rather jumped into a live hive of wasps.” Odette pushed her empty plate away.

“Face it, your company isn’t all rainbows and butterflies,” Charming retorted.

“I never said it was. Look, I get it, nothing is perfect. Neither is the company. It’s a massive company that makes a lot of money. Nothing is ever fully ethical, and I know it has its faults. But we do good things too and many of the people who work at the company are the best people I’ve met. And nothing in retail is ever fully ethical. Any company that says they are without fault is blatantly wrong and ignoring their own faults. But K&M tries to do good and we’re always evolving. Okay? So please, everyone lay off my choice of employment. I enjoy it and it pays really, *really*, well. Okay? At least we’re not Amazec, that wizard distribution chain that was sued for how it treats its workers. I mean, we don’t make people pee in water bottles or anything.”

“Isn’t Knights&Mage currently under a legal battle over the last president?” Ebbers took up his goblet. Odette glanced at him as he sipped it.

“What legal battle?” She furrowed her brows.

“Sis, you have *got* to check social media more.” Charming pulled out his phone. He slid it across the table toward Odette. He unlocked the crystal screen and swiped into a collection of screenshots. Odette took up the phone in silent horror. Her brother bit into a new roll. “But to be fair, this happened this morning. Since I knew you were coming today, I was going to ask what flavor corporate kool-aid they’re making you drink.”

Odette stared at a new article released that morning. *Ex-President Heinrich Daughtry launches lawsuit over unrightful loss of employment and accuses CEO and now President of plotting his death.* Odette devoured the article. Chills ran down her spine as the allegations filled the page. Heinrich’s lawyer said the company should have waited the mandatory time before filling his position. Then going on to say his children and ex-wife were trying to press charges for attempted murder.

Odette pushed up from her chair. “I’ve got to go.”

“What? You just got here.” Charming reached out to stop her.

“I’ve got so much damage control I have to do,” Odette blurted out. With the President and CEO out on the tour, the shareholders were likely to have a cow. If this article had been live all day, she should have known about it. Odette scurried from the mess hall, dodging tiny hands and her mother’s goodbye hug. She would have to come back another night. Barely making it out the front door, she cast her teleportation spell.

Like an explosion, she burst into her home and scrambled to grab her crystal. Ten missed calls and thirteen missed text messages from Xena alone. Odette called her back, crystal propped up on her desk as she darted about. Xena picked up on the second ring.

“There you are!” Xena’s face appeared on her screen. “I’ve tried-”

“Ten times, I know. I was at the Academy and there is no crystal service there.” Odette’s face exploded in red. She bounced about, pulling off her snow boots and pulling on more appropriate shoes. “It’s about the article, isn’t it?”

“You see it? A total hit piece.”

“My brother showed me, actually, and I couldn’t stop thinking the whole time about what we discussed the other day. I really should have studied more divination because I called it.” Odette flipped over to brush out her hair.

“You think they did it?” Xena sat back in her office chair.

“You still at work?” Odette pulled her hair up into a ponytail.

“Was trying to leave when the news dropped over the whole building like a bomb. I let all the departments go home as if nothing happened,” Xena sighed. She tossed her hands behind her head and closed her eyes. “The Shareholders have been on my ass for an hour.”

“Has Samosa left already?” Odette pulled out of view to pull on a blouse and tuck it into her slacks. She ripped on a blazer before picking up her crystalpad. Rufus woke up at her explosive entrance and proceeded to follow on her heels the whole time. Odette tried stepping over him, but he wanted nothing but her full attention. “Rufus, no, mom’s gotta go to work.”

“Might as well bring him, we’re gonna be here forever. And Yeah, Samosa is here. I’ve got her digging into what she can while I’m waiting for marketing and PR to get back to me. You on your way?”

“Give me five minutes, I’ve gotta find his harness but I’ll be there. I’ll get PR on the phone if you want to keep the Shareholders from molting. I know Lisa and Dart in PR, see if we can maybe get a press conference or something, maybe get on the news tonight to do damage control. Any word from Grecia or Ash?” Odette rummaged through her hall closet. Rufus’ full harness dropped into her hands. He nearly broke into pieces as he bounced off the walls at the sight of it. He flipped off the wall next to her

and scrambled down the hall at top speed. Then he barreled into her legs. “Fuck, Rufus, chill.”

The call went quiet. Odette froze as she glanced at Xena over the surface of her crystal. Xena smiled a full toothy smile. Then, shaking her head, Xena twisted toward a laptop on her desk. “Nothing on Ash and Grecia went right to voicemail. I have a feeling they knew this was coming.”

“And left us to pick up the pieces, fantastic.” Odette straddled Rufus’ back and wrestled him into his harness. “Be there soon, text me if anything changes.”

Xena hung up as Odette took up Rufus’ diaper bag full of spare food, treats, bowls, water, and poop bags. Nothing worse than him taking an acid poop on the company floors. Odette found her car keys in the chaos before both scrambled out the door.

Chapter Six:

“And I’m telling you, that sending a cease-and-desist letter to the news publisher, or the journalist, will only make everything worse. They think we’re guilty and doing that will only make us look more guilty.” Xena rubbed her face with her palms. Sat at a round table at seven in the morning with no coffee and no sleep did not make for a happy Xena. *In fact, it made a very angry Xena.* She tossed herself back in the conference room chair. Her muscles ached from being hunched for hours on end. Even though she and Odette left at about three am, Xena did not get any rest. She barely found time to eat something hearty and change before she was forced to come back.

“Well, the publication cannot be allowed to keep this article up!” Desiree, a harpy, clacked her beak aggressively.

“The internet has already spread this news; it doesn’t matter if we take the post down.” Odette folded her hands in her lap. “If we had done so at the beginning of yesterday as it dropped, we might have been able to put the fires out. But the torches and pitchforks are already out. There is no going back now.”

“Where are the President and CEO?” Carnage, a lizardfolk shareholder, clicked his long nails against the conference table.

“Grecia says they will be in contact as soon as they are in crystal range. They’re currently following along with the previous President’s expedition crew.” Odette straightened her shoulders. If the bags under her eyes were any clue, Odette did not sleep a wink last night. Odette let her fingers pick at the lace that draped her arms from her blouse.

“Well, this should take precedent.” Greg, a human shareholder, rolled his eyes.

“As I said, they’re not in crystal range, the only reason I know where they are is because Grecia just *happened* to be within crystal range when I called her last night. I think we should expect they will be unable to make it back in time to make a difference in public opinion. If we want to change the outcome of this story, we need to get ahead of this thing ourselves.” Odette glanced at Xena.

“I agree, between Odette and I, we can handle the circus with our PR. We just need you lot to shut up and let us take care of it.” Xena slapped her hand on the table. “If we’re done here, which we are, we have a public address soon.”

“Whoa, you can’t-” Greg scoffed as Xena shot him a dirty glare.

“Odette?” Xena snapped her head to Odette.

“I concur, this meeting is over.” Odette clapped her hands together. They both stalked across the meeting room side by side. Odette folded her hands in front of her and curtsied to the doorman. The three-piece suit man bowed as he opened the door for them. “Ensure the Shareholders are all escorted to their vehicles and are safely taken home. I don’t want any other accusations rising up.”

“Of course.” The doorman twisted to the shareholders. Xena and Odette left out the open doorway. The crystal doors clicked shut behind them. Xena and Odette held their shoulders back and heads high up until the elevator doors shut. Once the silver closed around them, they sagged backward. Xena collapsed against the back wall, stretching her arms along the cool silver.

“I have never been so exhausted, and I do basecamp every year with the knights.” Xena slapped at her cheeks in a weak attempt to wake up.

“Because basecamp is fun, and you enjoy that. No one likes being yelled at by petty people with more money than sense.” Odette raked her fingers through her hair. She deflated, toeing off her shoes in the elevator. She snapped them away into her pocket dimension. Then the doors slid open.

“If they didn’t help fund the company and have a say in the votes, I’d have gone full berserker on them.” Xena lurched out through the doors. The thud of every step she took made her feet heavier. Xena pulled out her phone to peruse what she could order to at least save her sanity. She wanted something hearty and filling. She only had time for cold coffee in the breakroom. “Can you magic us some coffee?”

“You want me to create coffee out of thin air?” Odette sneered as she waved the office doors closed behind them.

“Yeah, can’t you do that or is that spell too complex for you?” Xena tossed back at Odette.

“I will summon lava over your head before I respond to such a childish retort.” Odette tossed herself into her office chair. Her crystal pad landed

on the desk in front of her. Her forehead in one hand, the other flippantly waving at the crystal pad.

“Lava is kind of childish.” Xena sank into her chair. She folded her arms over her eyes and stretched backward. Her feet touched the edge of her desk. Her back and hips cracked. Xena groaned with happiness. “Today can’t get any worse.”

“Don’t say that,” Odette warned.

Xena chuckled to herself. The scent of warm coffee wafted up into her nose. She pried her arms off her face and found a mug full of black magic in front of her.

“You can say thank you now,” Odette huffed.

“Can’t, it’s not my barbarian vocabulary. Can’t even tell you how it’s spelled.” Xena sipped loudly on the mug. Odette’s eyes snapped up from her crystal pad. She flicked her forefinger at Xena. The cup tipped and the top smacked the bridge of Xena’s nose. Hot liquid trickled onto her mouth but didn’t burn. “You’re touchy.”

“I’m sleep deprived.” Odette rubbed at her cheeks. “Much like you, I am grumpy and easy to anger when exhausted.”

Xena set her coffee down. Watching Odette crack all her knuckles, Xena debated how to navigate the conversation. Usually, if she felt awful, she hit the lower gym and punched it out. Odette didn’t seem the type. Plus, they had a press conference and they both needed to be on their A-Game. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* Xena downed the coffee while it was still hot. She smirked. “Want to take it out on some punching bags? Or even me?”

“What?” Odette shook her head in disbelief. Odette eyed her. *It wasn’t a no.*

“We’re both grumpy and agitated. I say now’s the perfect time to square up. I’ll even let you get the first swing because I’m nice.” Xena pushed to her feet. Odette gawked in her chair. But by the time Xena reached the door to their office, Odette scrambled behind her. She wouldn’t even begin to assume how Odette felt. Yet the sorceress didn’t say no to her request. Odette wanted to punch at Xena. This would be the perfect opportunity for Xena to truly show her what she could do. No swords or Magic, just fists, the good old fashion way. Xena would win. She knew it deep in her soul.

The elevator down to the third level was muted. Xena glanced at Odette often. Yet Odette never looked up. Didn't so much as glare. Odette folded her hands in front of her. They passed the Knight Development department and training grounds. Into a smaller, more intimate gym, with punching bags and a boxing ring, they closed the doors behind them. And as they walked to the boxing pads, Odette stared ahead with determination in her eyes. She pulled the bungee ropes and flung herself up into the ring with precision.

"Aren't you going to change?" Xena hesitated by the ropes.

Odette fluffed out her petticoat and skirt. She rubbed her stocking-covered toes into the mat, testing their slip. Then she tugged her blouse up and over her head. Leaving her in a tank-top tucked into her skirt, Odette put her fists up in front of her. "I'll kick your ass in a skirt."

"Don't threaten me with a good time," Xena snorted. She froze as Odette cocked her head to the side. She didn't have time to contemplate where that came from. Xena tossed herself into the ring. "You sure you want to fight me?"

"Are you going to jabber on or are you going to let me punch you for free?" Odette tossed her hands out to the side.

"Hold your horses, we have to make a deal. Whatever happens in this room, no matter how much I win, you can't get upset with me or hold a grudge." Xena put her hand out.

"No magic, no swords, just me flattening you out to the mat, got it." Odette smiled a condescending smile as she took Xena's hand.

"As if-" Xena's words were cut off as Odette twisted, launched, and flipped Xena onto her back in one move. The air in Xena's lungs bounced around her throat on its way out with a wheeze. She stared up at a smug Odette. Xena's face turned to stone. *Fine, she wanted a real fight?*

Xena arched her back and flipped up onto her feet. Without waiting a beat, she swung and hooked Odette in the cheek. Odette stumbled away. Then her fists were up. She didn't say a word as Xena lunged for her. Swing for swing, the two countered and lunged at each other. Odette's main strategy was to stay on her toes and dance out of the way. Xena swung hard and precisely, making sure if she hit it would hurt. Odette found small openings to sting with sharp jabs or even kicks. Xena stopped leaving her shins exposed when Odette grated down the front of them with her heel.

Sweat poured down their faces as they continued. Until Odette found an opening. She launched up like a tiger climbing a tree and clawed her way up Xena. Wrapping her thighs around the goliath's torso, arms around her neck, Odette yanked. Xena ripped her legs open and tossed the Fae across the mat. Odette didn't wait, lunging again. Teeth bared, she tackled Xena at full speed. Grunting, Xena's back hit the mat. Odette swung for her jaw. Rolling with it, she twisted like a gator until the smaller woman was under her. Odette bit her.

"Ow! You cheater!" Xena hissed, elbowing Odette in the face.

"You never said I couldn't bite!" Odette howled, scrambling to her feet. Flinging herself at Xena, she shoved the larger woman's head down. Xena grabbed at anything she could. Her fingers wrapped around Odette's ankles. She tugged. Odette flew off her. They scuffled across the mat, pressing the other into the mat. Xena sensed immediately something was *wrong*. Tears welled in Odette's eyes as she scratched with all her might.

Xena pulled back but Odette didn't. Odette snarled as she grabbed her by the hair and rammed her forehead into Xena's nose. They were both at different intensities. Xena wanted to fight to prove her might. Odette was out for blood. *Time out*. Snatching up her wrists, Xena pinned Odette hard against the mat. "Whoa, pump the breaks."

"No!" Odette kicked at Xena's chest.

"Calm. Down!" Xena ground her teeth as she slammed Odette's arms above her head. With one hand, she shoved the Fae's legs out of the way and knelt in between them. Pinned and feral, Odette beat her heels into Xena's lower back much like a feral cat in a trap. Struggling to keep her hold, she knew she was at her limit. Finally, both hands stretched their arms way above Odette's head, leaving her inches from her face. "Before you break a rune or nail, cool off, *Princess*."

Odette shivered beneath her as time stopped. Staring into her eyes, Xena heaved for air. Her blood pumped fast enough she could hear it in her ears. The air grew heavy around them. Then Odette's eyes flickered to Xena's lips. She swallowed. She saw it. *Clear as day*. As Odette's gaze devoured her face, her chest rose and fell. Xena's grip loosened as she tried her best to ignore the tingle in her stomach. Odette lurched first, but Xena was mere seconds behind. Their kiss was *just as vicious* as their fight.

Lips crashed on top of lips, teeth pulled skin and clicked together. Xena lost control of Odette's wrists as she snaked her hands around Odette's face. Sharp, perfectly painted fingernails clawed down the back of Xena's scalp. Inhaling sharply through her nose, Xena ground her hips against Odette. Stocking-covered legs wrapped around her waist. She shouldn't *want* this. They were rivals! They fought constantly. But then Odette whimpered against her lips. Something animalistic growled deep inside her. Xena reached for Odette's hands and pinned them to the mat again. Tangling their fingers together, she squeezed. Odette dug her claws into Xena's knuckles while she tugged on Odette's lower lip.

The gym filled with their breathy responses. Xena broke away first to run kisses down Odette's cheeks and throat. One hand keeping those claws and wrists pinned to the mat, Xena's other hand stroked down Odette's stockings. The silky texture mixed with her plump, fleshy thighs. She gripped hard. Odette gasped. Xena ran her hand high up on Odette's thigh. The skirt already hiked up to her hips. Xena moaned against Odette's throat, "Dragons have mercy, I love when you wear skirts and stockings."

Odette struggled to free her arms from the tight grip. Xena bit down into the crook of Odette's throat. She growled in response to Odette's yelp of pleasure. Kissing it better, Xena sucked tenderly on her neck. Soft rose and hints of peony wafted up from Odette's flesh. She tasted salty with sweat. Xena trembled in response to Odette running a silky toe up her spine as far as her leg would allow. Her assault on Odette's throat stopped. Xena hunched her back. Hovering over Odette and her lips, leaving only enough room to breathe, she smirked. Odette panted for air.

"Now tell me, *princess*, what will it take to get you to say my name?" Xena felt something wash over her. She'd never been a particularly possessive lover. Nor one to dominate someone else. Sex had always been a playful tussle that ended in an orgasm. Yet here, with her palm resting on the top inner of Odette's thigh, with her fingers on the lacey edges of Odette's panties... she felt *primal*. Seeing Odette's lips reddened with rough kisses and her already bruising throat urged her on. Then Odette whimpered at the touch of Xena's forefinger to her lace-covered lips. Xena ran her finger down Odette's slit painfully slow.

"Please," Odette begged.

Xena swallowed as her mouth ran dry. Odette opened her eyes and they locked gazes. Pulling back another inch, she watched Odette lick her lips

nervously. Xena would have ripped those panties off right then. Her fingers wrapped around their edge, ready to shred them like thin paper. A button popped on the front of her shirt. Then the wall to their far-left thudded with the telltale signs of something massive hitting it at maximum velocity. It rumbled through the gym. Xena and Odette were knocked over, tumbling at the sheer sound and force.

By the time Xena scrambled to her feet, Odette bolted for the door. Xena had no time to recover. Her insides tingled but her panic and adrenaline pumped through her veins. Like acid that gnawed through her insides, she followed Odette. Odette barely had time to rip on her blouse as they burst out the door.

A massive rhino trampled down the halls in full plate armor. Knights charged after it with a few others slinging spells. Then Samosa rounded the corner and spotted them emerging out of the gym. “Ah! So, I see you both know about the situation happening?”

Xena froze, unable to look at Odette. “Oh, there’s a situation alright.”

“Look, I don’t know who in research is about to get fired, but we can discuss that later. Right now, we’ve got to stop it. He’s already broken so many things.” Samosa wheezed for air, wiping sweat off her forehead.

“Let me just guess, the Rhino is in full plate mail, meaning tranquilizer darts won’t work?” Xena folded her arms.

“And you’ll never guess what kind of armor it is,” Samosa smirked.

“They put magic repellent armor on the rhino who is now charging through the office, didn’t they?” Odette rubbed her temples. “You just had to say today couldn’t get any worse, didn’t you?”



Odette stared at her reflection in her bathroom mirror. The memory of the boxing ring haunted her all day. After somehow managing to corner the Rhino and Xena suplexing it to the ground, the day didn’t stop. From the PR circus to Samosa wanting to fire every department head, there was no time in the day. Until she reached home, and all the chaos stopped distracting her. Alone in her own head, not even the walk with Rufus could clear her senses. She could feel the touch of Xena’s lips on her throat. Her

everything trembled. Had that truly happened or did Xena knock her unconscious? *It must have been a dream.*

Until Odette pulled her blouse off and found small purple bruises peppered over her throat and collar. She ran a finger over one of them, watching it fade into her skin as the rune on her nail glowed. Yet she didn't touch the second one. She should. It would be silly not to clean up her 'wounds' from battle. She left one just at her collarbone as a reminder.

They'd crossed a boundary they could never cross again.

She stripped completely and turned away from her reflection. Odette switched the shower on. Stepping in, she froze under the mist and heavy spray. Icy water evened out her frenzied heartbeat. Her hands shook as she tried to scrub the feeling away. It didn't stop her thighs from clenching together. Odette melted as the temperature rose in her shower. Steam filled her sight. For the first time in a long time, she touched herself.

This was way out of line. But the shivers and tightening in her chest didn't go away. Her clit jumped at the sensation. She circled it tenderly. Stepping back, she hung her head against the tile of her shower. *She shouldn't.* Odette panted for air. Images flashed behind her closed lids. Xena hovering over her, pressed into her. Odette chewed on the inside of her cheeks. *Princess*, purred into her ears, akin to the purr of a lioness happy with herself. Xena's rough kiss left her lips red for hours. Odette gasped. Her orgasm rocked through her with little warning and left her breathless. Her skin reddened around her breast and throat with embarrassment.

She cleaned the evidence of her crime in foaming soap. Scrubbing hard enough to peel a layer or two of flesh, she nearly skinned herself. She washed and dried swiftly. Odette couldn't even glance at her steamy mirror or her guilty reflection.

Odette pulled on cotton pajamas, still half dripping wet in a haze. Rufus gnawed on his rubber ball in the center of the floor. She tripped over him as she tried to spear her legs through her pajama pants. He eyed her with confusion. She rubbed his head as she sat down beside him on the floor. Steam lifted from the edges of her pants. Her tongue tangled up the enchantment twice before she could complete it.

"I'm a mess, Rufus." Odette hung her head.

The empty, hollow apartment devoured her. She drowned in the echo of her breathing on the walls. Until someone pounded on her front door.

Rufus launched into action as Odette yelped. Scurrying to her bed to grab her focus, Odette tripped over her own pantlegs. Rufus barked loud enough to shake the door. He jumped and beat his paws against the door in defense. Odette followed him, barely able to stand up herself.

“Rufus! Shut up! It’s me!” Clara’s whimpering voice floated in the air.

“Clara?” Odette wheezed for air. The door handle jerked and wiggled.

“Odette! Please, please let me in! I’m so sorry.”

Odette wrenched the door open. To her surprise, it was Clara outside the door. Drenched in a thick rain that seemed to come out of nowhere and shivering. With a huge reddening bruise on her right cheek and one around her throat. Odette blinked rapidly. Clara pouted with a puppy dog gaze glued to Odette’s face. She held onto her full purse and duffle bag like it was her only lifeline.

“What happened?” Odette stepped back, pushing on Rufus’ snoot to force him further back into the apartment. He growled loudly at Clara. Odette motioned for Clara to come inside. When the door shut, without answering the question, Clara tossed herself into Odette’s arms. Odette froze. Her heart skipped a beat.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” Clara whimpered into Odette’s ear. “Odie, I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you; I should have seen how good I had it with you. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. I just want to come back home. I want to come back home to you.”

Odette’s arms moved on their own. Wrapping around her drenched ex, she stared at Rufus. Rufus sat with his head cocked to one side. As if to say, ‘what are you doing?’, he looked to Clara’s dangling purse and then up to Odette again. Odette pulled Clara close. She didn’t know what she was doing. But tears welled up in her eyes as Clara clung to her. Clara continued to murmur apologies and sniffle into Odette’s shoulder. Finally, when all her tears were dry, Clara nuzzled her face into Odette’s throat. Awkward butterflies filled Odette’s stomach. Not loving butterflies, but the kind that made her feel sick. Her organs clenched uptight. Clara kissed Odette’s pulse point.

Odette ripped backward. Planting her hands on Clara’s shoulders, she grimaced. Clara stared up into her face with worry. Odette opened her mouth to speak. *Tell her to leave, tell her to go home to her parents.* She left a wound in Odette’s chest that bled all over again. For the last week, Odette filled that hole with work and ignoring her emotions.

“You can stay the night. We can talk about what happened in the morning when you’re better. Let’s get you out of those wet clothes and cleaned up.”

Clara toed out of her heels and pushed them aside. That’s when Odette saw the purple bruising up and down her right leg. Clara sheepishly laughed before limping toward the hall.

“Clara.” Odette snatched Clara’s wrist. “Where did you go?”

Clara turned on her good foot. Her gaze fell to the floor. “I went back to Astur.” Her ex, Odette was familiar with Astur. They had been finishing school sweethearts. Astur was also trouble. “She said I could stay with her when I left like an idiot. I was angry and I wanted to hurt you like you’d hurt me. And I knew you would hate to see me back with her. But then Astur turned on me.”

“Shocker.” Odette gritted her teeth, forcing her hand to release Clara’s wrist. She sighed before pointing to the herb cabinet. “Rufus, door.”

Her hellhound scrambled to the large glass cabinet. Most people would store plates and knickknacks in it. Framed with golden painted wood, crystal doors that hummed with magic filled the frames on the front. There were two long ropes attached to the handles for Rufus. She taught him to open and retrieve herbs from it just in case she came home bleeding or worse. What if she slipped and hit her head in the shower? Rufus tugged the doors open before standing up on his hind legs. He put two paws on the main shelf.

“Rufus, broken bone.” She instructed. He snatched up a curly vial out of the cabinet. “Bathtub, please.” Rufus scurried to take the vial to the bathtub.

“I don’t think it’s broken.” Clara hugged herself. Odette took up her arm and took the weight off Clara’s bruising leg.

“Better to be safe than sorry. If it’s a fracture it’ll fix it fast. I’m going to have you sit and soak in it for a while.” Odette toted Clara through her apartment. Rufus sat in front of the tub, tail wagging against the toilet as patiently as he could. Odette propped Clara up against the wall before starting the bath. Rufus let her take the vial. Once the tub was full of warm water, she poured the clear liquid into the bath. Bubbles broke the surface as the water changed from clear to a hazy gray. The steam that smelled of lavender and shea butter filled the air. \Odette put out a hand. Clara had already pulled off all her clothes.

Odette turned to living stone as Clara used her as a crutch to climb into the tub. Odette could recall all the nights she kissed every inch of Clara's naked body. How she would rub Clara's back, kneading into her peachy skin. Clara was soft. Like she was made out of clouds and fairy dust, her skin was always supple and smooth. Yet as Clara slid down into the tub, Odette's mind flashed elsewhere. Not with her bruised ex, but steely skin that was rough and like rocks. Firm hands that held her pinned to a mat.

"Odie?" Clara poked Odette's nose.

"Why are you calling me that?" Odette pulled back.

"It's a nickname. A lot of couples have nicknames for their fiancé." Clara cocked her head to the side. She scooped up some of the bath water and drizzled it down her chest and arms. Sighing with relief, Clara melted into the bath.

"You left me, remember." Odette pushed to her feet.

"Wait." Clara snatched Odette's hand and tugged. Odette knelt beside the tub again. Clara brought Odette's palm to her bruised cheek. Odette held her breath. Clara nuzzled her face against her open palm. "I take it back. I take you back. Odie, baby, please."

Odette's tongue ran dry as her ex kissed her palm. Then she set her chin in Odette's hand. Acting on its own, Odette cupped Clara's face. Tears welled up in her eyes. Odette brushed her fingers across Clara's cheek. Then she dug them into her silky hair. Clara leaned closer to Odette.

"We should... talk about it in the morning." Odette's chest clenched uptight as she untangled herself. Tears threatened to choke her as she forced herself to walk away. "Once you feel you can stand, go ahead and take a shower. I'll gather you some pj's to sleep-"

"She hit me. Because I compared her to you," Clara blurted out. "Because I said I still loved you."

Odette stopped in the doorway to the bathroom. She pivoted toward Clara. The pieces of her pride crumbled around her as her ex sniffled. Clara broke into sobs, her hands wringing her hair. Odette scrambled across the bathroom to the side of the tub. "Clara."

"I told her she was nothing compared to you, and she hit me. Then she said if you love her so much, why don't you go back? Huh? So, I realized, I do love you. I've always loved you." Clara clenched Odette's hands and pulled them close to her. "I love you, Odette Plum, please, say you love me still."

“Of course, I still love you.” The words tumbled out of Odette’s mouth without permission.

Chapter Seven:

Xena sat in her truck, seeing Odette's spot open beside her. Her blood pressure affected her temples at this point. A headache the magnitude of a dragon raid rattled within her skull. Had she truly messed up that bad? She wasn't supposed to kiss her! She shouldn't have *wanted* to kiss her. Yet as Xena pressed her forehead into her steering wheel, she couldn't stop thinking of it. Odette's puffy red lips cracked open an inch to pant for air. The feeling of her shivering beneath her. Xena inhaled through her nose and kicked her door all the way open. No matter her internal turmoil, the company was still on rocky feet. Samosa barely had a foot in the door of the investigation of Chatterbee and Daphne due to the scandal. Then there was the Rhino incident yesterday. Xena's first task was to pull every Department Head into a meeting and discuss safety protocol.

Xena stormed into the elevator and watched the doors close before her. Her phone lit up with a call, the shrill ring rattling off the walls. Xena fumbled to remove her phone. Nearly dropping it twice, she smacked it to the side of her face. "What!"

"Hey, are you coming in today? We have the department head safety protocol meeting." Odette's voice filled her skull.

"Uh, yeah! I'm coming up from the parking lot. Where the hell are you?" Xena jerked around, her eyes scanning for any invisible people watching her.

"Oh, I used the portal entrance today. I thought I was going to be late," Odette huffed. "Anyway, hurry up to the department head level. I've summoned them all. Plus, we've got to start addressing the Evals. Scandal or Rhino or whatever, Payroll will have our heads if they're not inputted pronto. I need you to stop beating around the bush and just pick a rating for Marc and the other knight departments."

Odette hung up before Xena could even open her mouth. As if yesterday didn't happen. *Maybe she suppressed it?* More likely Odette would ignore it until they weren't 'on company time'. She wasn't the kind to talk about drama at work. Xena sighed with relief as she sagged against the back of the elevator. Pocketing her crystal phone, she rubbed her face with her palms. The lingering scent of hay and crisp air over dewy grass

wafted up from her hands. Xena spent most of the morning pacing the yard. She felt foolish for even worrying. Odette would most likely demand the incident didn't happen and they would go on like it never happened. They never kissed and it was never the hottest thing to happen to Xena ever. *Because Odette and she were still at odds.*

Xena bullied her way out of a crowd in front of the elevator as it opened. She stormed across the foyer and headed straight for the department head floor. Ignoring the soft wave from the secretary or even the smiles from past subordinates, she bristled. *Beating around the bush?* Xena never beat around the bush! She merely wanted to give Marc a fair eval. If Odette had her way, she'd probably slap him with a 'meets expectations' and some snide comment about not producing enough as a manager.

Xena stepped into the long hall full of offices and found everyone collecting in the meeting office. Odette sat at the front of the room in a rolling chair. Xena stopped as Marc and Chandler stared at her from across the rooms. Massive bruises covered their exposed arms. Marc physically tried to stop the Rhino yesterday. Chandler caught him midair, but the Rhino caught Chandler with his hands full. Xena crossed her arms as they both smiled at her sheepishly. They waved shortly before their gaze darted away. Xena waited for the last department head to sit down before she closed the door to the room behind her.

"Excellent, since we're all here. Is there anyone here who wasn't here yesterday?" Xena's voice boomed over an eerily silent crew. All of them glanced at each other. Xena strolled to the front of the room. Odette sat back in her chair, her gaze scanning the crowd. The Goliath woman stepped up to the front of the table and found an empty chair pushed into the table. She spun it around and sat down on it backward. "So, then I take it everyone knows why we called this meeting."

"It was Daren's fault; he was supposed to lock up the Rhino," Chandler confessed.

"But Daren works for you, does he not?" Odette snapped, hands folding over her crystal pad.

"We understand that accidents can happen," Xena sighed.

"But someone could have been seriously hurt." Odette glared at Xena.

Xena raised a brow, her gaze locked on Odette's face. "We are glad that no one did."

“Yet we need to go over safety protocol at this company,” Odette exhaled as she snapped her fingers. A massive screen dropped behind her head. Xena glanced up at it as she pulled up a safety document onto the screen. Odette zoomed into Department Head safety protocols. “Look here, the first sentence says that Department Heads are responsible for the safety of their teams. So how do we ensure our teams are working safe?”

The room erupted in murmurs as Odette waited in her seat. Xena scanned over Odette’s cool expression and frosty posture. Then her eyes stopped at Odette’s hands. Despite the whispers of ‘who was the most in trouble’ from the peanut gallery, the world hushed around her. Xena’s eyes locked on the engagement ring that lingered on Odette’s hand. Her heart exploded into her throat.

She scrambled to remember, but hadn’t Odette taken it off? For the last few days she didn’t wear it. They were broken up. Xena could have sworn. Yet, Odette rubbed at the ring absent-mindedly, and Xena spiraled.

“We ought to take more care to double-check our staff has locked down research items and animals. And make sure someone does so on our days off?” Evelyn piped up among the crowd.

“Thank you, Evelyn a fantastic idea. Any others?” Odette scanned the room again with a stony gaze.

“What do you want us to say?” Marc huffed.

“I don’t want you to say anything.” Odette snapped her attention to him. “I want you all to collectively come together to come to an agreement. Especially when it comes to items and animals that could cause irreparable harm.”

“It was one Rhino.” Chandler shrugged.

“A rhino wearing new anti-magic plate armor that broke over a hundred thousand gold’s worth of company infrastructure and equipment.” Odette blinked rapidly. “Why are all of you just waving this off like no one could have died yesterday.”

Xena pulled her attention from Odette to the crowd. Half of them were smugly watching the drama unfold. The other half waited anxiously for their own turn to be fired upon. Xena stretched out her arms, cracking her shoulders. All eyes turned to her. She cracked her knuckles before she climbed to her feet. “Look, the point is, something unsafe happened. I don’t care if you think it could have been worse. It was a bad thing and we’re not debating the level of bad it was. So, what we want is everyone

here to promise this will never happen again. And if it does, it's an automatic write-up. I don't care if it was one of your staff or you. If your team accidentally or not releases a dangerous animal or item into company property, you're getting written up. No if's, and's, or but's. Are we understood?"

A symphony of whiney 'yes ma'am's filled the air. Xena then pointed at the screen. "Alright, next point."

Odette sighed but continued to go down the safety pamphlet on the screen while Xena pointed at the screen. The whole team went over everything on the screen. Then Xena stopped as Odette closed the screen. Odette folded her hands over her crystal pad. "We should also address Evals."

"This incident will not affect your current evals." Xena stepped back up to her chair.

"But it will be included in your notes for next year." Odette pulled up her schedule. "You all should have received an invite for your evaluation times next week. We will be working through them all week so please look at them before you leave for the weekend today. Thank you."

Xena waited as everyone left with a beaten-down, worried expression. Xena worked her way toward the door as Marc and Chandler lingered in the doorway for a few more seconds. Then they left with a grimace and mutters between the two of them. Xena closed the doors. Then pivoted back to Odette. "Real nice."

"What?" Odette sputtered, reeling back in her seat.

"You killed what little moral we had for the day, Ice Queen." Xena crossed her arms under her chest.

"What was I supposed to do? Coddle them like you? Oh, it's alright, my precious knights, I know you didn't mean to cause damage to the entire building!" Odette snapped to her feet. The blinds in the meeting room slammed shut. She dropped her crystal pad down on the table. "Admit it, had it been Evelyn's fault or any of the magic team's fault, you wouldn't be cutting them an inch of slack."

"I think you forget what it's like to be one of them! Always overworked and underappreciated!" Xena tossed her arms out to her sides.

"It's because I *remember* what it's like to be one of them that I have such high expectations!" Odette slapped her hands onto the table. Xena crossed to the opposite end. They faced each other. Odette tapped her

fingers against the table. Their locked gaze never broke. "This is a business, Xena, you forget these people are our coworkers and subordinates, not our friends."

"You forget that they're people!" Xena shoved a chair out from in front of her. It slammed into the opposite wall.

"They're professionals and they should be treated as such!" Odette flung her hand out, a chair of her own flying across the room.

"Fine!" Xena beat her fist against the table. "See how fast they quit."

"If being expected to work safely is a quittable offense, then I will gladly replace them. By the way, your replacement interviews are in an hour here. Be sure to include my expectations to them when you explain the job position." Odette frisbee tossed a file across the table at her. Xena snatched it out of the air. The paperclips worked hard to keep everything together as Odette stormed out of the room. Xena pivoted to retort at her, but she slammed the door shut behind her.

Xena lingered in the room, unsure of where to go or what to do. She hated that she agreed with Odette at the same time as disagreeing with her. Xena inhaled steadily. Her lungs struggled to hold the air as she set the papers down. Hands trembling, she focused on moving about the room and fixing it. Setting the chairs up for an interview and not for a public execution anymore. She opened the blinds and door. Xena found notepads and a few pens and set them on the table. Her brain searched for any distraction. Her chest weighed down like bricks. *Had Odette still been engaged when they kissed on the mats?* She sat down in her chair again.

Before she could linger in her own spiraling issues, her first interviewee showed up. Xena pulled on her usual bravado as she stood. Shaking his hand, she greeted the Orc in a suit to the room. He sat down, making sure to tuck his jacket down. His tie was rumpled, but Xena couldn't tie a tie, so she didn't hold it against him. "So, Xagu, it says you're an internal promotion from Sales?"

"Yes, I currently work under Gilga." He beamed. His tusks popped out and exposed the gold ring hooked in the right one. Xena liked how genuine his smile appeared. He situated himself in his seat nervously.

"So, what makes you want Knight Development?" Xena sat back in her seat.

"I am a fitness fanatic." He swallowed.

“It’s not all workouts, though,” Xena teased. She tapped at the table softly. “Relax, I’m not going to bite your head off. I can see you want this job. So, what’s the real reason?”

“I think there is a huge payoff in community support in Knight Development. Historically it’s been a very limited selection of candidates who make it into the Knight program here at K&M. I want to change that. I want to show the progress this company can make. I’ve seen what one struggling soul who makes it big in the knight program can do for his community. I mean, even working for sales has helped my household tenfold.” He shrugged as if the weight tumbled off his shoulders. He relaxed back into his own seat. All his cards on the table, all his truth exposed, and he stared at Xena expectantly.

She smiled, “See, that’s the answer I wanted.” She slapped the tabletop happily. She sat up and opened his file. “Alright, so then, how would you suggest we do this? What existing protocols would you utilize or are you trying to go completely off the script?”

He exhaled shakily. His eyes watered a little as he chuckled nervously. Then, sitting forward, Xagu pulled out a notebook from within his jacket. Xena watched him pitch a very thorough recruiting plan, utilizing new and existing protocols. He wanted to expand the reach of recruiters into other cities and smaller communities. Xena welled up with pride. How was she going to interview two more people when she knew who she wanted? If she left a legacy, she could only imagine Xagu would build upon it. She folded her hands over his file as he finished out his ideas.

“Well, you sure did come prepared. I like that in a department head. As VP... well, one of them. I appreciate leaders who are prepared and idealistic. I do have to warn you, that you will also be dealing with Odette too.”

Xagu flinched in his smile. She cocked a brow. He laughed it off, but it didn’t cover up his physical reaction. “I, uh, hear she’s a hard sell. That she’s very by the books.”

“She’s something alright. But she is by the books. Keep your head up and your team in line and you’ll never have to worry about her.” Xena grinned, putting out a hand. “Well, thank you very much Mr. Xagu. I have other interviews today, but I will reach out to you personally with my decision by Monday. Alright?”

“Thank you! Very much for the opportunity. I cannot wait to hear back.” Xagu bound up to his feet. He walked away three times taller than when he entered. If Xena were honest, it would take a miracle for the next two external applicants to make an impression. Sitting back in her chair, she set Xagu’s file aside.



Odette shook the hand of her last interviewee, feeling less sure than she ever had. Twisting her ring around her finger, she fiddled with the stone. The files in front of her sat unimpressively on the tabletop. None of them were inspiring. All of them were alright, but none of them seemed to fit the mold. They needed to be of strong morals and character. *They needed to follow the rules.* Magical development is not about coming out with new trinkets or toys. It’s about doing good. Everyone who came through the office to interview did so with the intention of being an inventor. *And while magical development needed big thinkers and great ideas, the leader needed to be rigid.* Her new department head would have to be the voice of reason. It’s not about if it’s possible... it’s about *should* it be allowed.

Odette rubbed her temples. A headache rammed her system with little mercy. Her nose scrunched up. She scrambled to her desk for her healing stone. Pressing its cooling surface to her forehead, the door to the elevator dinged. Odette pried her eyes open. A sigh of relief fell off her lips as Gilga stepped out into the hall.

“Gilga! You’re a sight for sore eyes.” Odette grinned.

“Oh no, is this about the Rhino thing still or something else?” Gilga smirked as she stepped into the office. Arms full of papers and folders, she shut the door with her heel. It gently clicked shut behind her. “You wanted me to report back in about the inventory.”

“Oh! Yes, thank you! I appreciate your diligence and my happiness to see you is due to your honest nature. I don’t think I can deal with any more drama today.” Odette laughed as she straightened up in her seat. “Please, have a seat.”

Gilga sat down where her last interview did. Odette cleared her desk of files and items. That’s when Gilga sat down her stack of papers and

Odette's stomach dropped. Gilga grimaced. "Maybe you won't enjoy seeing me after this."

"I had a feeling you would find something. I just don't enjoy the number of things you've found." Odette took up the first paper. A list of inventoried items with their margins, resale price, purchasing price, and on hands. The column she hated the most was the one labeled 'unaccounted for'.

"It's not bad in the eyes of the company, because it looks from the outside to be that we have more inventory than we counted. Every pallet I pulled had something else switched out in the middle. One or two or more. It seemed like someone was stashing them. Until I tried to test one of the power wands. A simple spell even a child could cast. But it was a dud. Every additional item I found was a dud. It seems their magic was siphoned, and they were just hiding the empty corpse. I don't presume to know who or why they did it, but someone is ruining company products and siphoning the magic somewhere else. So, I still have the product but it's useless." Gilga laid out printed photos of her testing products. From wands that didn't shoot basic light spells to enchanted weapons, they were all ruined. Odette stopped at a photo of gemstones. The usual liquid core drained of all its magic. *Just pretty rocks in a bag.*

Odette lay her cheek on one hand, then held up another excel sheet. Detailing the item, its previous use, the date it was found, and the date they tested it. Odette looked over the pile of evidence that Gilga found. Her stomach turned. She reached for her crystal pad. As if summoned on thought alone, the elevator dinged from the hallway. Samosa sauntered out onto the hall. She flipped through a file with her perpetual scowl.

"Hey." Odette glanced up from the papers to Samosa.

"So, then you've seen it," Samosa dropped the file onto Odette's desk. "Thank you Gilga for your thorough investigation. I will be taking it over from here. Please do not discuss this with your team, but we are investigating an internal issue."

"I suspected as much. My team knows I was investigating the pallets and they found me performing the tests, but they think it's a product production problem." Gilga clapped her hands against her lap. "I'm going to wrap up for the day and go home. We have a new event day after next, so I want to get as much sleep as possible. I'll be here overnight for it. If you need me, shoot me an email."

“Thank you again, Gilga.” Odette waved Gilga out of the office. After the department head was safely tucked in the elevator Odette flopped backward. She groaned loudly. The meat of her palm pressed into her eyes. Her headache returned with vengeance. “It’s *so much* worse.”

“It’s worse than even I imagined. I thought it was a simple theft. Just shipping company products out through distribution but this? This is beyond illegal.” Samosa sank down into Gilga’s chair. Odette pulled out an extra healing stone and handed it across the desk to Samosa. They both pressed cool stones to their temples in unison. Samosa picked up some of the papers only to put them back down. “And with Ash being out, it’s all on you and Xena.”

“Don’t remind me.” Odette rubbed the stone in circles at the center of her forehead.

“Saw y’all in a yelling match earlier today. Did that happen today then?” Samosa teased.

“Happens every day!” Odette skipped the stone across her desk and onto the hardwood floor. “We even got into a full-blown battle in here when she told Pucker about the investigation!”

“I saw that coming.” Samosa set her stone down on top of the desk.

“You see everything coming but said nothing?” Odette blinked rapidly.

“I see a lot. It’s my job. I also saw you taking care of it. So, I focused on something more important.” Samosa shrugged, crossing her arms under her chest.

“Right.” Odette cleaned up her desk. Organizing the items, she tucked them all into a neat file. Then she tucked them away in her desk. She activated the rune on the outside of the drawer. The whole drawer glowed red with magic before dulling. “Have you possibly seen a future where she is no longer vice president?”

“I am not at liberty to discuss that with you,” Samosa smirked as she tapped her fingers on her bicep.

“Have you seen a future where *I am* not the vice president?” Odette gritted her teeth.

“Calm down, I haven’t seen either.” Samosa waved the questions off with a flip of her hand. “Besides, we have a bigger issue.”

“The theft? The Rhino? Or Xena’s favoritism?” Odette listed them off on her hand.

“I was thinking how you two have yet to interview an assistant. You both have too much on your plate to not have one at least.” Samosa slithered till her back lay on an arm of the chair and her legs were kicked up onto the other.

“Really? That’s the issue? An assistant?” Odette rolled her eyes.

“You say that, as you toss the rock you’ve used five times today to combat a stress headache.” Samosa put her hands behind her head and wiggled down into the seat. “Man, these are even better than the chairs in my office.”

Odette didn’t answer Samosa as she pulled her crystal pad across the desk. She opened the email from HR about the position of VP assistant. There were at least four people on the deck to be interviewed. She just needed to set up a time and date. She contemplated going over Xena’s head and doing the interview herself. Then her fingers came across her ring again and twisted it around her hand. Odette spun it over and over as she stared at the email.

“So then, the rumors are true. You got back with your ex?”

“Huh?” Odette jumped in her skin.

“You’re wearing the ring again and everyone was whispering about how she posted crystalgram pictures from y’all’s place about love and forgiveness.” Samosa made finger quotes from above her head. Then she put her head back on her hands folded between her skull and the chair’s arm.

“She asked to come home.” Odette glanced at the ring. It never felt so large on her finger until now. She constantly situated it, as if it would fall off at any second.

“And you said yes?” Samosa raised her brows.

“I guess.”

“You guess or you said yes?”

“Why is everyone so interested in my love life?” Odette barked, tossing her hands out. The ring flew across the room and clinked against the glass. Groaning, she tossed herself to her feet. She crouched to pick it up off the floor. The elevator dinged in the hallway. Odette stood as Xena stepped out onto the floor, on the phone. Loudly laughing, she stomped down the hall. Odette’s mouth curled down into a deep frown.

Then she saw the clock on the wall above the elevator. She cursed, “Shit.”

“Whoa,” Samosa laughed. “What’s that for.”

“It’s past five. The portal gate closes at five.” Odette stomped over to her desk.

“Damn, I forgot they limited the time on that thing.” Samosa slithered to her feet.

“Limited the time on what thing?” Xena hung up her phone as she entered the office.

“The portal.” Odette sighed, “Looks like I’m walking home.”

“What? Why can’t you just teleport there or some magic thing like that?” Xena eyed her.

“Well, unfortunately, when you pay for a good, enchanted apartment, they charm against teleportation that they’re not notified about in advance. I’d just be teleporting a few blocks, and I’d still have to walk. Their office is already closed, and I didn’t even think about mentioning it. I’ll just get tossed out of the forcefield.” Odette tucked in her chair.

“In those heels, I don’t think so, come on, I’ll drop you off. You’re on the way to Mumford’s anyway.” Xena nodded at Samosa. “How’s it going?”

“Just dandy.” Samosa faked a smile before she stalked out of the office with her file. Xena and Odette watched her scowl return to her face as Samosa stormed into the elevator.

“What’s up her ass?” Xena jabbed her thumb in Samosa’s direction.

“As you’re about to take me home so graciously, I won’t say anything because I don’t have anything nice to say.” Odette crossed her arms under her chest. Xena froze as Odette glared up at her. Then she sighed and stormed out of the office.

Xena locked the doors behind them before rushing to keep up. Odette stabbed at the elevator buttons aggressively. The ding over her head echoed through the empty hall. Xena barely stepped inside before they lurched downward. “Interviews went that bad? Huh?”

Odette rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “They went fine.”

“Oh, did they? You have your next prodigy picked out already?” Xena teased.

“And you found someone, did you?” Odette whirled to face Xena.

“I did. He’s perfect.” Xena beamed as the doors opened. She held them open with her arm and motioned for Odette to walk.

Odette brushed past her. She stayed silent the whole second ride down to the parking garage. Her rage demanded to be released. How she wanted to launch at Xena and bury her under an avalanche of rubble and her own truck. But the company already suffered enough property damage.

The more she thought about tossing Xena into the asphalt of the parking garage, the more she thought of yesterday. It returned to the forefront of her mind in the blink of an eye. Her stomach rolled up into knots. Odette lingered outside the passenger door of Xena's truck. She tugged the door open but couldn't muster up the muscles to move. Two large hands wrapped around her and hoisted her up. Odette's insides turned to frightened mush as Xena planted her inside the truck.

"Since you're having trouble climbing," Xena teased.

Odette whipped around in the seat, snatched up Xena by the shirt, and yanked her close. "Look here, you walking insensitive brute—" but Odette's mouth ran dry. Xena lingered in her grasp, staring up into her face. Odette hovered over her, unable to unclamp her fingers. Her heart pounded in her ears. Then the flicker of lights against her engagement ring blinded her. Odette let go of Xena and shoved her backward. "I can climb just fine. I was just thinking of how bad it smells in here."

"Oh, that's the were-fur, it's pretty thick when it's wet." Xena laughed it off, slamming the door shut before Odette. Yet Odette couldn't get her body to work for a long moment. Not until the truck was started. She melted back into the seat and ripped on her seatbelt. Her right hand went back to her ring again.

They drove in silence. No music, or talking, only the engine and the rumble of the road beneath them. Odette stared through the windshield. Her throat closed.

"So, uh, you're... back with Clara? Was it?"

"Why is everyone so obsessed with my relationship!" Odette gasped.

"Because we kissed." Xena's face paled.

Odette scowled harder. After a long moment of awkward silence, she unclenched her jaw. "She came home last night, covered in bruises and begging to come home. I let her. Is that so bad?"

"Covered in bruises? Where did she go? To war?" Xena scoffed.

"She went back to *her* ex." Odette picked at the seatbelt. She had been wanting to speak about it all day, but it never seemed to come up. She

never had the time. Everything flew by. Plus, who could she even talk about it with? *The woman she made out with in the middle of a fist fight?*

“Let me get this straight. She broke it off, went back to her ex, got beat up, came back to you?” Xena slowed down into Odette’s apartment complex. “Look, I don’t want anyone to have to deal with stuff like that, but it’s not your fault she got hurt. You know, she hurt you. Just because she also got hurt doesn’t negate what she did to you.”

Odette pulled her seatbelt off her. “And what would you know about what she did to me?” *As if she would ever tell anyone... how stupid she had been.*

Xena came to a complete stop. They stared at each other in the cabin of Xena’s truck. Gaze unbroken, the rumble of her stilled engine filled the void of sound. Then Xena broke first. “I guess I don’t.”

Odette swallowed the lump in her throat. Looking away, she couldn’t find the strength to open the door. *Look back.* Odette peered back at Xena. Xena stared through the windshield.

“You don’t.” Odette tossed the door open. “Thank you for the ride, I will see you tomorrow.”

Chapter Eight:

Xena sat on the wooden fence, absorbing the warm sunshine beating down on her shoulders. Snuggles, the were-bear, and her newest companion, a were-gator, perused the field of grass. Xena spent an hour hiding treats and enrichment in the yard. She let them loose into the yard. Dot, the were-gator, waddled across the grass, finding the hidden water hole. She sank into the leaf-covered pond with a happy hiss. Snuggles found one of the buried hunks of meat. She clawed it out and freed it out of its protective leaf cover.

“You having fun making a hide and seek game?” Dinah teased. He tossed a stump over the fence. Xena tapped the stump with her foot as if threatening to steal it. Dinah shoved her off the fence as he climbed between the wooden beams. Xena scrambled to take the stump. Dinah planted his boot in her side and launched her across the yard. She flopped across the grass, cackling as she smacked into the back leg of Snuggles.

Snuggles snorted and rolled onto her back to play with her meat. Xena patted the were-bear’s fluffy thigh as she sat up. Dinah sat on his log, one leg crossed over the other, a long wooden pipe poking out of his mouth. He puffed it a bit, filling the air with sweet cinnamon and apple scents. Xena got to her feet and returned to her post on the fence. Dinah offered her the pipe. She shook her head. He shrugged and smoked it more. Spiced Moss was popular with knights, as it often relaxed muscles and helped ease mental trauma. However, good as it was, Xena couldn’t smoke it. It made her teeth feel gritty and her stomach disagreed with smoke in any fashion.

“Where’s the kid?” Xena scanned the yard for her barn hand. West had been there this morning when she started staging her game. Then her eyes came to rest on a lump of flesh asleep under the cover of a tree. “Lazy sack of bones.”

“He’s a good kid. I kind of ran him ragged yesterday so cut him some slack.” Dinah leaned back against the fence. He propped his long arms out on the beams of wood, exhaling rings of smoke above his head.

“What did you do to my farm hand now?” Xena prodded her father with the toe of her boot.

He swatted her foot away. “Started building that new coop down the hill. Made him heave wood all over the place until the boy couldn’t feel his legs or arms. Then I made him drive us back up the hill.”

Xena laughed deep from within her belly. *The same thing he would have done to her.* However, Xena had a few advantages over poor West. One, being twice his height. Two, being able to curse her father out for his ideas without being smacked with a board of wood. West still respected Dinah too much to call him out on his bullying.

“I told you I would pay someone to come build that coop whenever you wanted.”

“Building a chicken coop puts hair on your chest. He’s learning,” Dinah huffed, rolling his head around to crack his neck.

“It also might break the poor kid. I’ve built things with you before, old man. I nearly beat you last time we built a tire swing.” Xena prodded him again.

“And I would have shown you what is what girl. Don’t mess with me. I’ll flatten you.” Dinah punched her boot. She kicked his balled fist. He began to fake box her foot. She swiped and kicked at him. He poked his pipe in his lap so he could put both fists up.

“Oh, you wanna go old man? I’ll whoop you in ten seconds flat.” Xena dropped onto her feet in front of him. He bound to his feet with both fists up.

“You think you can still keep up after being stuck behind a desk?” He sneered. They knocked bawled fists teasingly. Xena shuffled on her feet as her father faked throwing punches at her. She dodged them as he lightly tapped her in the sides.

“It’s been a week, ya geezer.” She got him in the side and threw him aside. He came at her for real after he regained his footing. Snatching her up by the overalls and flipping both of them. They hit the ground with a loud thud.

West jumped awake at the sound of them wheezing in between fits of laughter. Xena smacked her father’s head. He flicked her in the ear. They lay in the sun as the animals around them hunted and explored the open field of the farm. Peaches, the were-raven, flew down from the barn to perch next to Xena’s head.

“Geezer! Damn! What doing? What doing?” Peaches weaved left and right as if to join in the fun. Xena scratched under his beak. He ruffled his

feathers in happiness.

“So, out with it then. What’s been bothering you?” Dinah picked up his discarded pipe off the ground. He lit it and puffed it. Peaches stole it right out from his lips. Dinah coughed, sputtering in surprise. “You little shit, give me that back.”

“*Little shit, ah ha ha!*” Peaches mocked Dinah as the bird bounced across the yard.

“You’re not getting that pipe back.” Xena folded her hands behind her head.

“Like hell I’m not. When that thief goes to roost, I’ll snatch it back and beat him with it.” Dinah shook his fist after the bird.

A moment of silence fell over them. Snuggles rooted up another hunk of meat. Peaches danced out of Dinah’s reach with the prized pipe. Xena watched clouds float over their heads. Soft breezes carried the scent of hay and flower patches through the trees and across the fields of their farm. Xena closed her eyes as she debated telling her father. Work was one thing, but Odette was another. What was bothering her? *Many things. Mostly Odette.*

“She’s so infuriating,” Xena confessed in one breath.

“Then beat her up.” Dinah shrugged.

“I wish that would fix this.” Xena swallowed hard as a new lump formed in her throat. “We tried to just fight it out but that only made things worse.” She left out the part where she nearly lost all control on that boxing mat. Xena tried not to think about it. Which, of course, only made her think of it more.

“Well, I’m not very good with business or politics, but sounds like you need to cut ties.”

“I’m not leaving the business just because we can’t get along. Despite how often we are at each other’s throats, I won’t let her win like that. Besides, you need me working there.”

“Not if it makes you unhappy like this.”

Yet Xena couldn’t even reply. *Because she wasn’t unhappy.* She was infuriated, and she was stressed out, but every day this week only reminded her how much she wanted this. Xena sat up in the field and dusted herself off. “It’ll be fine when she realizes I won’t give in and she quits. She doesn’t even need this job. Her Headmaster father probably pays for everything. She’ll realize she doesn’t need to stress and leave.”

Dinah eyed his daughter but said nothing as she clambered to her feet. He took her offered hand. After she hoisted him up to his feet, her phone dinged. An email dropped into her inbox, an invitation to a company event for tomorrow. Something to cover up the scandal and bury it in crystalnet news. A huge party suddenly with big names in the city to attend. Of course, Xena knew this wasn't truly an invitation but a warning. Be there and schmooze the internet celebrities to make everything go away. "Smooth, PR, real smooth. Welp, looks like I'm going stag to a fancy people party tomorrow night."

"Bring home those fancy sandwiches. I love that cucumber cheese thing between little white bread squares." Dinah winked at his daughter before sauntering toward the tree West lingered under. "Nap time is over you flesh sack. Let's go, chop-chop!"

Xena waved at West who climbed to his feet with a pinched face. Xena watched her father snatch the boy up by the back of his britches and carry him like a suitcase across the field. Snuggles and Jeremy, the regular werewolf, crawled after him with curiosity. They sniffed at West's dangling legs and shoes. Xena poked the phone back in her pocket and headed for the house. She would need something to wear. She already knew before clawing through her closet that she didn't have anything nearly fancy enough. A trip into town would be necessary.

Another ding hit her inbox.

From: Odette Plum

To: Xena Battlemoar

What are you wearing to our surprise gala? I don't want us to clash because I suspect they will make us take photos together. Plus knowing PR, they're going to make us do some sort of toast.

-Odette Plum

Vice President **Knights&Mage Inc.**

Xena blinked wildly. She debated not replying until she did have something to send back. Then she tossed herself into her truck. Her phone rang over the speakers as she cranked her truck in reverse.

"Oh, good, you got my email." Odette appeared before her on a video call. She stood in her closet, flipping through items hanging before her. "Where are you going?"

“To town, because I don’t have anything to wear.” Xena shrugged.

“Perfect! I’ll meet you and we can work out our outfits together. Clara also does not have anything that matches mine. It’ll be a good time to get her something suitable.” Odette scrambled toward the screen. “Where are you going? Munster&Thyme? Or that boutique off sixth?”

Xena blinked rapidly, “I’m not shopping with you.”

“Why not? We need to be united on this if they’re going to bury the scandal,” Odette scowled, leaning back on one of the shelves in her closet.

“Ah, so you caught that too, huh? You think it will work?” Xena roared down the road. Leaning back in her seat, she stretched her arms out while she tapped her hands against the top of her steering wheel.

“Of course it will, and don’t change the subject. Meet me somewhere, we’ll get our outfits together.” Odette raised a brow in challenge.

“Fine, meet me at the boutique on sixth.” Xena hung up her phone with a slap. She regretted calling as she knew what awaited her at the boutique. A shopping trip with Odette and Clara? Maybe the new scandal would be *‘Knights&Mage Vice Presidents kicked out of store for starting a death match in the socks department.’*

One way or another, there was going to be a new story on the front page by Monday.



Odette glanced up from the rack of hanging plants outside the boutique. Xena’s truck rumbled to a stop outside the boutique next to her car. Clara looked up from her phone with concern. Her hand ran through Odette’s arm and tucked herself against Odette’s side. Clara wore a more sensible pair of jeans with a fitted heart-shaped top. Her hair in ringlet curls pushed back behind a pink headband. Odette asked earlier what happened to her usual clothes. Clara laughed it off and said these were her clothes, she just paired them differently. Odette was just happy to see Clara happy. Clinging to her arm, nuzzling up to Odette’s side like she used to when they first started dating.

Odette pressed a kiss to Clara's temple before she waved to Xena. Xena towered over the two of them as she stepped out. Xena tucked something into the cabin of her truck before adjusting her clothing. "Sorry, was still in the farm overalls."

"Farm?" Clara scoffed.

"Her father runs a were-rescue farm," Odette explained, smiling down at Clara.

"Sounds like sweaty, gross work." Clara flashed a charming smile at Xena before she slipped toward the front door. She opened it and tugged on Odette's arm to follow her.

"Well, a hard day's work has never bothered me before." Xena brushed past Odette and Clara into the shop. "Sometimes Odette gets gross too. Last year she got covered slime trying to pry something out of a blob's body."

"I smelt that sour slime for weeks afterward. I swear I can still smell it on the wind sometimes when someone's making Jell-O" Odette faked a gag before following Xena into the shop. "How about the time Pucker pushed too much air through the pipes and flooded the toilets and halls with septic fluids."

"Don't remind me. Pucker has made a few calculated risks and that man is not good at math." Xena rubbed at her temples.

Clara laughed sheepishly. "Sounds like the office is always a wild time." She shimmied up closer to Odette.

"Wild is putting it mildly." Odette wrapped an arm around Clara's mid-section.

"Did Odette tell you about the Rhino last week?" Xena jabbed a thumb at Odette with a chuckle. Odette's face lit up bright red. Clara glanced up at her with curiosity. Odette laughed nervously. Xena patted her on the opposite shoulder. "We had a Rhino rampaging through the building in full armor. Odette had to box us in with the creature while I wrestled it to sleep."

"No, she didn't tell me. Odie, baby, were you in danger?" Clara pouted.

"In danger? You're joking! That Rhino started running away from Odette! I was in danger. Once she threw a fireball at me." Xena bent backward with a full belly laugh.

Odette broke into a fit of giggles that she tried to stifle. Clara eyed them. Sobering up didn't help, she broke into another fit of giggles. "It

was only a small one. It's not like a meteor swarm or anything."

"You can cast meteor swarm?" Xena straightened up with a snap.

"It was my final in college. I passed with flying colors," Odette smirked. That smirk fell when she glanced at Clara. She smiled that 'I'm trying not to ruin the mood' smile that Clara perfected long ago. Odette swallowed hard as she motioned at the racks along the boutique's walls. "But that's not the point why we're here. We need outfits that pair well."

"Right! I'm so excited. This will be my first big kid venue." Clara beamed as she gravitated toward the sparkly rack.

"Big kid venue?" Xena bent to whisper in Odette's ear.

"Don't," Odette warned with a scowl.

"I wasn't going to say anything." Xena put up her hands in defeat.

The boutique was much larger inside than it appeared outside. The expansion spell over the shop worked hard to keep up with high vaulted ceilings and floating shelves full of clothing. All of it event clothing, some less flashy than others, but a variety hung from multiple collections. Some more pointed at holidays, some more gender-neutral. There was an entire wall of jackets that could mix and match with bottoms. Odette stopped in her tracks at a black dress that lingered near other blazers. Black lace over a satin bodice, high in the front, low to the floor in the back. It was a rounded neckline that hung off the shoulders with full sleeves that hooked around the middle finger like banquet gloves. Odette reached out for it. Two steel-colored hands tugged it off the rack and lowered it into her hands.

"Wait, I don't even know if it fits our theme or what we're looking for." Odette froze. Her attention shot up to Clara who circled a rack of more skintight dresses of shimmering fabric. She kept gravitating toward a red number. Odette couldn't very well wear something this elegant if Clara was wearing something that skimpy.

"We don't have a theme yet. Besides, you were practically drooling. Put it on, or I'll wear it." Xena smacked Odette in the side with her hip. Odette stumbled across the wooden floor. Xena waved down one of the boutique workers and motioned for the dressing rooms at the back. Then she hip bumped Odette a second time, "Go."

Odette glared at her but allowed the sales worker to collect the dress and lead her toward the dressing rooms. She would try it on, realize Clara hadn't changed, and put it back. *Much safer in something less flashy so she*

didn't clash with her date. Yet, as she pulled off her blouse and slacks, her eyes never left the black lace. The worker let her know the back had buttons and she would need help getting in. Odette stepped in and pulled it up. The associate buttoned it for her and backed away. Her back to the door, eyes straight in the mirror, she watched it slowly come together on her.

Her chest lifted with the boning in the dress and the skirt fell around her legs. Her heart skipped a beat. It made her curves deadlier, something she usually ignored for a more professional look. Odette twirled in the doorway to the fitting room with childish glee.

"How's it fit?"

Odette's heart skipped a beat as Xena stepped up behind her in the mirror. With a full outfit in the arms of the sales associate, Xena leaned on the frame of the fitting room. She beamed down at Odette, her amber eyes glowing in the mirror. Odette turned steadily till she peered up at the taller woman. Her throat threatened to close. Xena stared at her the same way she did that day Odette was flat on that mat: Hungry and devouring her from head to toe.

"It fits like a glove," Odette squeaked.

"Ooo! Let me see?" Clara's voice broke through the haze in Odette's brain. Odette brushed past Xena, flustered. Clara gasped loudly and scrambled across the floor. "You're stunning! I love that on you, it makes you look like a princess!"

"I love it too." Odette fought to exhale as Clara put her hands on Odette's hips. Clara's eyes followed the hem of the dress and the pattern of the lace. Then her puppy dog eyes looked up at Odette with wonder.

"I want to look this good too. I'll look for something more princess-ee." Clara bounced back into the racks with newfound determination.

Odette let go of all the air in her lungs. Her shoulders relaxed back as she pivoted back toward her dressing room. Xena was already gone into her own. Odette nodded to the sales worker and motioned at the buttons. She let the woman nimbly release all the buttons down her back, then scurried back into the room. Hanging the dress back up felt almost anti-climactic. She didn't want to put her slacks back on after wearing it. But she returned to normal and situated the blouse back over her chest. She left the room, clinging to the feeling of the dress. The associate nodded at her

prized possession. Odette smiled and offered it up to them, “Yes, I’m getting it.”

“Perfect, I would be very sad if you left it behind.” The associate grinned and whisked the dress away to the counter.

Odette watched Clara hand dress after dress to her own employee. The poor employee waddled dress after dress back. Clara, true to her word, found more impressive gowns than the ones she looked at first. She stayed with black and white as the theme, but while Odette knew immediately if she liked it... Clara did not. She would pace in it, posing in the mirrors and asking for Odette’s impression. About the tenth dress, Clara dove back inside to try another. Xena finally exited her booth.

“I think this one is probably the best fit for me.” Xena stepped out into the waiting area, hands on her hips. A black lace fitted turtleneck under a flared blazer fit her snugly around her chest and muscles. She wore silk soft trousers that flared out at the bottom.

Odette stared. Mouth ajar, she took in her coworker with a newfound light. Xena never wore anything other than button downs tucked into slacks or gym clothes. She’d seen her in jeans and a cotton polo once while at a company picnic, but she ruined it by getting into a wood chopping competition with Marc. Here, she looked stunning and elegant. Odette returned to life as she clapped slowly. “I agree. That is fantastic.”

“And we’ll have that lace theme going, don’t you think?” Xena pivoted to look in the mirror. “I’m going to need you to keep me from ripping this shirt all night.”

“It’s too thin and sheer to enchant. You’re just going to have to refrain from being an ogre at the party,” Odette chuckled. Xena whipped around to glare at her. She laughed harder, her hands on her stomach. Xena waved off her snorts and giggles as she went back to eyeballing herself in the full-length mirror. Odette sobered up before standing. She stepped up beside her and nudged her with her hip. “It’s good, you should dress like this more often.”

“It’s impractical. And I can’t fight in this. So, for one night we’re at a truce, alright?” Xena rolled her eyes before she pulled the door to her room back open.

“No promises,” Odette retorted. She opened her mouth to speak up again only to freeze as the door to Clara’s room opened.

Clara stepped out tentatively with her mouth agape. She glanced over her shoulder at the inside mirror, before glancing at Odette. The dress was black over a white tulle, princess gown, cut like dripping silk with little black lace flowers throughout the skirt. Odette smiled as Clara bound toward her with glee. “This one! This one, I just know it.”

“It suits you.” Odette breathed, cupping Clara’s cheeks. Clara leaned into the touch. Clara snatched up Odette by the front of her blouse and tugged her into a kiss. Odette’s lips crashed against hers. The kiss shocked her insides like electricity, stinging and leaving her insides roasted. Clara broke the kiss eagerly and pulled away.

Clara stared into the mirror behind Odette, twirling and swaying the dress. Odette lingered in the same spot, her fingers finding their way to her lips. They prodded her flesh that tingled the way one does after being electrocuted. As a woman with several siblings, very rarely supervised, she knew the feeling all too well. Her stomach and lungs did not clench up. No butterflies, no buckling knees, no trembling hands. Clara’s kiss used to always take her breath away.

Odette caught movement in the corner of her eye. She glanced up and found Clara still dancing in the mirror. Xena stood in the doorway of her fitting room, eyeballing them both with disgust and confusion. “Did someone die?”

“What? Why would you think that?” Odette squeaked. She whirled to face Xena with her cheeks burning bright.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Xena pointed a finger at Odette’s face.

“Oh, that’s my fault. She’s so shocked by the dress. It’s exactly what I imagined my wedding dress would look like. Oh, Odette, do you think we could get Lavender’s bridal to make me something like this?” Clara bounced up to Odette and scooped up her hands.

“Right. The wedding dress.” Odette’s tongue dried.

“You’re right. It’s too early to decide what dress to wear, but I definitely think this is a huge contender. I always told my mom I wanted to be a princess and here I am! I look like one!” Clara squealed as she booked it back into her dressing room.

Odette stumbled after her fiancé. The woman she asked to marry and imagined would wear a wedding dress. The woman she loved and wanted

back in her life. The woman glowing like the sun at seeing the sales associate take the dress up toward the register.

Chapter Nine:

Knights&Mage Inc. opened its foyer and the second floor to a new type of clientele on important nights. They whipped up a whole ball in one day and all the employees on the PR team. A coat check at the front, a few knights to stand watch, wizards, and bards to enchant and delight those coming, it was the whole shebang. The chandelier's glowed with the sheer magnitude of magic within the room. People in all shapes and races in glitter and tulle, all with their best faces painted on and shoes they would regret. Celebrities from history, from past company programs and collaborations, and some press packed the walls. The whole building hummed with people and sound.

Xena lingered in the separate ballroom for employees where they could pull away to get some space. Most of the Department Heads were there, dressed up like twinkling lights. All of them wore their 'event' badges on their bracelets to allow them into the employee's area. Marc leaned against the wall next to Xena in his full regalia, covered in medals and stripes. Gilga continued with her story about the raging minotaur that demanded a refund yesterday and how Kai, the faun behind the counter, deescalated it.

"I mean, it wasn't even our product, how was she expecting to get her money back if the item isn't even ours," Evelyn snickered.

"Because entitled people don't care who pays for their ignorance, they just want someone to pay." Gilga tossed back her glass of champagne.

"Here, here!" Marc raised his glass, prompting everyone else to follow. Xena clinked her glass against his.

"Not that we don't hate the presence, boss, but why are you here and not in there?" Pucker nodded toward the party at large. Most of the employees were not here for the glitz and glam, but for the free booze and food.

"Odette and I are supposed to make an entrance together." Xena brushed the sleeve up on her arm to stare down at the watch on her wrist. "In about five minutes, so I'm staying out of sight."

"Who is staying out of sight?" Odette chirped as she rounded the corner of the ballroom. She worked earrings into her ear as if she didn't

finish getting ready until she got to the parking garage. She dropped two heels out of her arms onto the floor.

“Odette!” Evelyn gasped. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.” Odette blushed as she fumbled with stepping into her shoes.

Xena hesitated for a moment as she stared. Odette’s red hair was pulled half up with a black flower crown. Her exposed throat and collarbone were shimmering under the chandelier light. No necklace to distract from the lace trimming of the low collar on the dress. Then Xena remembered how to function and jumped into action. She offered her hands to Odette. Odette clutched her desperately as she toed into her heels with better success.

“Thank you! I can’t drive in these and once the dress was on I couldn’t see my feet anyway.” She fluffed out the skirt around her. Odette smiled up at Xena before offering her arm. “Shall we dazzle them?”

“We better or else PR will skin both of us,” Xena laughed. She hooked arms with Odette.

“Well, either way, they’ll get a story to cover up the last one.” Odette waved to Evelyn and the others, “Wish us luck. See you all in there.”

Xena wheeled her away from the gathering crowd of employees. She spied through the open doorway toward the crowd. A massive crowd within a ballroom. Illuminated by a chandelier and a thousand floating orbs of lights. Drinks flowed out of fountains and food was served by outside staff in matching suits. The party looked well prepared. They separated the ballrooms with magic curtains that hid the other ballroom. The curtains moved, exposing the staff ballroom to the main ballroom completely. Magic tickled at her flesh as Xena and Odette entered through the glittering red forcefield. Lights flashed before them. Odette beamed ear to ear, waving at the crowd. Xena saluted the crowd. Then her eyes fell to see who was in the crowd. At the front, she spotted Clara without having to try. Xena’s face faltered. Clara glared right at her with the dirtiest glare the Fae woman could form.

“Are you okay?” Odette whispered close to Xena’s ear. Xena wore flat shoes, and Odette agreed to wear heels so they would be closer in height.

Xena leaned in closer to Odette. “Your fiancé is not pleased.”

“Well, she’ll have to suck it up. The shareholders want a picture.” Odette wheeled Xena toward the shareholders.

“Do you think it’s wise?” Xena cocked a brow. Odette glanced up at her as if to end the conversation. Xena tugged Odette closer as if to press it more. That’s when Odette grabbed her by the hand and tugged her viciously into a photo with the shareholders. Faking a huge grin, she leaned into the photo with all of them. Cameras snapped around their heads.

Xena let Odette lead them through the ballroom, stopping with people to talk about mundane things. She tried three times to wander off. All three times, Odette wrenched her back either by arm or by magic. Every time she caught a glimpse of Clara glaring from across the ballroom. Odette seemed oblivious to it. They even stopped to say hi to Daphne dressed in an elegant ballgown. Odette made sure to mention how pretty she looked and how expensive the gems in her hair appeared. Then as they watched her disappear into the crowd, they paid Samosa in the shadows of the room a visit. Samosa disappeared into the darkness. After a waiter stopped by with a tray of finger foods, and it looked like the coast was clear, Xena pressed the issue again.

“Look, whatever is your deal tonight, can you squash it?” Xena huffed into Odette’s ear.

“My only deal is you trying to wander off and leave me alone with these wolves,” Odette hissed from the lip of her champagne glass. She sipped it tenderly as her eyes scanned the sea of other faces.

“No, your deal is your fiancé is clearly pissed at you or me or both.” Xena snatched up Odette’s glass. Odette reached for it but pouted when Xena tossed the whole glass back and put it on an empty, awaiting tray beside her. To Xena’s chagrin, Odette was offered a new champagne flute immediately.

Odette sipped it, leaning away from her. Xena glared at her. She held the flute away from Xena with disdain. Her attention fixed on Xena’s face with a scowl etched into her painted lips. “She was upset that she and I would not be photographed walking in together. I told her that PR wanted us photographed and that we could get photos later before we left. That tonight might be a party, but it’s a work party. She wasn’t pleased.”

“Is that why she’s looking at me like I kicked her fallen grandmother?” Xena took up another offering of meat on sticks. Whatever beast it came from, the meat was juicy and flavorful while still being in tiny chunks. “I need ten of those.”

“There’s a whole hot platter in the staff area. We can go eat something more sustainable in a little bit. There’s a reporter right there, she’s one of those workforce reporters who thinks we’re chaining our employees to desks. We need to schmooze her.” Odette nodded in the direction of an elf woman in purple and blue flowy material. Then Odette took up a morsel of food on a stick of her own. They both deposited their empty sticks onto the empty tray that floated by. Odette took a sip to clear her throat. “And don’t be ridiculous. She can’t look like that. Her grandmother died over a millennia ago. We’re Fae.”

Xena coughed, clearing her throat in surprise as she stared down at Odette. She shrugged up at her. Xena growled, “That’s not the point, Odette! The point is she’s likely to make a scene.”

“No, she’s not.” Odette rolled her eyes as she wheeled them toward the reporter.

“Social media begs to differ.” Xena’s mumbled comments to herself fell on ignorant ears.

Odette wheeled them into the conversation with the reporter. They laughed and chatted. The reporter took a selfie with them. Odette invited the reporter to have a tour of the building later in the week with Samosa and the two of them. An insider scoop with access to even some research on the promise of no photos in research.

“Of course,” the reporter said with a smirk, “trade secrets.”

“Oh no, it’s the spirits that linger, they get frightened by flashing lights and turn to poltergeists,” Xena snorted.

The reporter gasped but Odette elbowed Xena in the ribs. “She’s kidding. It’s company interest that all untested and unreviewed research is kept within the company while we work out any bumps.”

Xena and the reporter laughed as Odette shook her head, chuckling under her breath. Xena laid it on as thick as she could. Odette cut through with witty lines and honest answers. Together they charmed half the ballroom, and the other half were already dying to speak with them. A few more photos were taken before Xena convinced Odette to return to the staff ballroom. If only to eat something more solid than a chunk of meat on a toothpick.

Odette exhaled loudly as they passed through the curtain. Xena eyed her suspiciously. Then relaxed as she watched Odette fiddle with the waist of her dress. Odette’s hair fell into her face as she twisted away from the

staff to obviously situate her bra within the dress. “Generations of witches and wizards and they still haven’t found an enchantment to keep your bras from digging into your ribs or dragging your tits to the ground.”

Xena’s eyes widened suddenly. Odette looked at her in confusion.

“What?” Odette squawked.

“Did you just call them your tits?” Xena cackled.

“I’m starved, slightly tipsy, and digging my bra out of the side of my armpits, so yes, I did.” Odette stomped across the floor toward the massive buffet table. Just as promised, a large selection filled the table. Meat and vegetables kept hot with plates full of bread, fruits, dressings, and salads galore filled her vision. Odette scooped up a bit of everything and tucked herself against the wall. Most of the staff had already joined the main ballroom. Only a few lingered with their plates and champagne off in their own corners.

Xena blocked anyone’s view of Odette as she flopped back against the wall. “Better?”

“The wall is so cold,” Odette moaned, devouring a roll. “This is so good, why is food so good?”

Xena’s lips curled. “Slow down or you’ll choke. I can’t heimlich you in that dress.”

“Bullshit, yes you can.” Odette poked her hard on the shoulder.

“Careful, Princess, you’re going to get food all over yourself,” Xena teased. *It rolled off her tongue so easily.* Like breathing, she exhaled, and the words came out of her mouth. Odette tensed, those wide doe eyes, *like prey*, staring up at her. Xena sputtered to life. Pulling back from the conversation and from Odette, she stuffed food into her own mouth.

Odette stepped toward her. Xena’s stomach twisted. She was starved. But it wasn’t for food, not anymore. Xena swallowed hard on her own tongue. Her feet grew heavy as her heart raced in her chest. Odette licked her lips.

“Sorry, I-”

Odette shook her head. “It’s fine, it didn’t happen so it’s fine.” Odette choked on her own roll. She scrambled to grab her drink. Xena snatched it up and planted it firmly into Odette’s hand. Their fingers scraped together. Xena’s attention stopped at the clunky ring on Odette’s finger.

The ring she put on when she got back with her ex. The ring she put on the day after they kissed. Xena felt the presence of it grow into a wall that

slammed down between them. Odette backed away, coughing tenderly to clear her throat. Then she continued to shove food into her mouth. They both avoided looking the other in the eye.

The magic curtain's pulled back. Sound filled the staff ballroom, heels clicking against the tile headed their way. Xena peered up to see Clara charging at them seconds before she arrived. The curtain fluttered shut, cutting off the noise from the other ballroom.

"There you are, why didn't you tell me you were eating?" Clara scoffed.

"Sorry, it was my idea." Xena stepped further away from Odette, tucking the plate into one of the trashcans hidden among the pillars and tables.

"Of course, it was," Clara sneered.

"Excuse me." Xena whipped around. "You want to rephrase that?"

"I'm not a child, I don't have to rephrase anything." Clara put her hands on her hips. "Odie, baby, why are you still ignoring me."

"You do if you don't want to get kicked in the teeth." Xena crossed her arms under her chest.

"Xena, cut it out." Odette put her own plate in the trash. "I am sorry, Clara, I should have grabbed you before we came back here." Odette put an arm around Clara.

Xena froze as Odette pulled Clara in for a hug. Clara stared into Xena's eyes with daggers in her iris' the entire time. Xena cocked a brow. Clara wrapped her arms around Odette and squeezed her in tight. The tiara that decorated her nest of hair shimmered under the floating lights.

"Come on, you wanted to dance. We can dance now." Odette took Clara by the hand and whisked her away from Xena. The angry Fae woman finally broke eye contact with Xena so she could snuggle up closer to Odette.

Xena debated going home. She'd done her part. Shown up, made up a good face, schmoozed a party full of people. PR would probably forgive her if she dipped out early. It would be so easy to slip out to the parking garage. *No one would even notice.* Yet, she followed the couple out into the main ballroom. Marc and Chandler snatched her up swiftly with the other knights. Fast tempo music came from the band of instruments and technology. Crystals dangled amongst the floating lights, filling the ballroom with music.

Xena started her evening by watching for Odette and Clara. Then, after a few minutes of swinging and play tossing others about the dance floor, her attention fell away from them. Marc and she tested the strength of her new suit by getting into an arm-wrestling match propped up on a tray from a waiter. The waiter seemed far more pleased being a tabletop than serving alcohol anyway. Xena glimpsed Xagu in the crowd and made him face up against her. He struggled for a long minute before Xena won. After assuring her that he didn't do it on purpose to get the job, she tossed him into the ring of people dancing.

The night passed on without incident. Most of the cameras that flashed filled the outskirts as people collected memories with friends and celebrities. Coworkers and others who worked for her came and went, making sure to get a photo and stop to say hi. It felt peaceful for a long time.

The chimes of midnight and the call to leave the party filled the air. Xena sighed with relief. They made it through the night. Employees shuffled down the opposite ballroom to leave out the parking garage. People were saying their last goodbyes when Samosa stepped out of the doorway to the staff ballroom. Three guardians', the knights employed by the government, stepped out with her. Daphne bolted. The guardians chased. Photographers snapped images of Daphne being dragged to the floor. People watched in awe as she screeched. Then lights exploded in the room and the doors rattled.

"What?" Xena launched forward only to be buffeted backward. Pure magic tossed her across the room and into the crowd. The guardians barked something from across the room. Samosa and the other internal crew joined the fight. Her ears rang, and a high-pitched shriek bounced off the inside of her skull. Xena gasped for air. Her hands felt foreign as she pressed them to her face. Then Xena opened her eyes to Odette hovering over her.

Odette pressed her fingers against Xena's cheeks as the world came back from the explosion. "Hey, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, what was that?" Xena wheezed.

"Raw magic." Odette winced, "I hadn't fully prepped you on the situation. I apologize for my oversight. I didn't think they would pull this tonight. But we have got to go. We've got to handle this. There are guardians swarming the building and they think there might be more."

“Where did she get raw magic?” Xena stumbled to her feet.

“Odie, please, let’s go!” Clara whined from behind Odette. Clara started out blurry in Xena’s eyes. Then she fully formed as Xena rubbed her eyes clear of the rubble and chaos. Clara’s tiara clung to her hair in pieces, a bruise already forming on her arms and cheek.

“Clara, I’m sorry but I can’t. You should go home and get to safety.”

“What? No! I want you to take me.” Clara stomped her foot onto the ballroom floor.

“Seriously, get out of here. We have a job to do.” Xena bristled as she shoved Clara aside.

“Don’t. Touch. Me!” Clara snatched up Odette by the arm. “Odie-”

“Go home! Clara!” Odette barked as she slapped Clara’s hand away.

“Oh! So the job is more important than me, is that it? We were just attacked. I don’t feel safe going home alone! You’re my fiancé, you need to protect me!” Clara threw her hands out to her side.

“I’m not your fiancé!” Odette shrieked.

The early empty room fell silent as Odette ripped the ring off her finger. She tossed it to the ground. The ring bounced across the marble floors. Xena blinked rapidly. Clara’s eyes watered up dramatically. Xena flinched backward, pulling out of the situation the best she could. This wasn’t her fight.

“But we were supposed to get married,” Clara whimpered, her lower lip trembling.

“Why would I marry you? You don’t even love me! Because if you did, you would know how important this job, this company, *these people* are to me. Everything is about you! Tonight wasn’t for you but you made it about you! If you loved me, you wouldn’t have cheated.” Odette snatched Xena up by the arm, “come on, we need to get ahead of this.”

“Odie!” Clara cried out.

“And I hate that nickname! My name is Odette.”

Xena was at a loss for words or comments as Odette dragged her through the crowd of employees to guide the crowd out of the building. Pieces of crystal and chandelier floated in the magic air around them. Fabric and champagne littered the ground as Xena and Odette chased the scene before them.



Odette and Xena sat on the floor of their office with a bottle of champagne passed between them. The crystal screen played live coverage of the incident. Odette kicked her heels off long ago. They had a small tinfoil box, void of its previous food filling. She crumpled it up and tossed it into the trash can. The screen blew up with images of a battle out on the main street. Daphne and Chatterbee threw bulbs of things at the guardians, pockets of raw magic exploded around them.

Raw magic, or the form magic takes when it's not enchanted, cast, or contained in some vessel, is explosive. A shake in the wrong direction could blow a building into the sky. Enough in a small space could disintegrate a person into dust. Daphne had been lucky in the ballroom that the raw magic she let slip out of her bag hit a tray and not a person. Though, by the looks of the coverage of their battle, it wouldn't last long.

After Daphne and Chatterbee took their battle to the streets, K&M closed and locked its doors. Dusting their hands of this problem, *so to speak*. Odette expected that Daphne and Chatterbee would either be in cuffs or in graves by morning. The sun was three hours away from rising before their very eyes.

Odette handed off the bottle of champagne, eyes transfixed on the screen.

"So, are we going to address it?" Xena tossed back a swig.

"Probably we'll have to make some public message about the incident, but I doubt it'll matter after this." Odette waved at the screen, tucking her feet under her.

"Oh, no, that I get. I meant the whole fiancé thing." Xena wheeled so her back pressed into the desk.

"Huh? Why would we address that? It's settled." Odette snatched up the champagne with a scowl.

"Your face tells me differently." Xena wagged her finger toward Odette's cheeks.

Odette rolled her eyes. "I'm fine."

"You're lying." Xena prodded Odette with her silk sock-covered toes. Odette slapped at Xena's feet. Xena only prodded her more. "Come on, tell

me, how does it feel to be the one to embarrass her and not the other way around?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. She tried to make it her or this job again, but I chose this job. Just like I did then. I don’t know why she thought it would change after she cheated and left me. Then came back begging to come back into my life. Did I tell you she changed her clothes? Like started wearing more mature clothes and walked Rufus for me while I was at work the other day. She never does that. As if she was trying to prove that nothing happened. Like she took a vacation to her parent’s house and not with that scummy ex of hers. I can’t even imagine!” Odette tossed the now empty bottle into the trash can. Once she started, she couldn’t stop. The words just poured out of her mouth. Everything she’d wanted to say but held her tongue. It fell off her lips and removed the bricks off her shoulders.

“See, don’t you feel better?” Xena teased, wiggling down into the floor to get comfortable.

“I’d feel better out of this dress,” Odette grumbled, scrambling to sit up again.

“Then take it off.” Xena poked her with her foot.

Odette slapped Xena’s ankle with every ounce of strength she had. Xena wrenched her leg back toward her torso. Odette fluffed out her skirt. “I can’t.”

“You can’t or won’t?” Xena propped her arms upon her bent legs.

“Can’t. There are buttons in the back that I can’t reach.” Odette hung her head back with a whine. “I’m going to have to cut it off at this point.”

“Don’t go and ruin a good dress, *princess*. I’ll take it off you.” Xena pushed up onto her knees.

Odette’s mouth dried. Her attention snapped to Xena. Amber eyes glowed after her as Xena crept up behind her. Odette shivered as rough fingers scraped against her exposed shoulder blades. Fear spiked in her belly. The memory of their kiss returned. The feelings in the ballroom below returned. Tipsy from champagne, peaking off the high of her emotional roller coaster, Odette’s body felt foreign. Odette jerked forward and out of Xena’s hands.

“Whoa, I won’t bite you. You were just complaining.” Xena put her hands up.

Odette scrambled to her feet with fists balled around the edge of her skirt. Xena stared up at her with her brows knitted down on her face. Odette swallowed as she eased her hands open.

"I'll take care of it myself." She whimpered, her voice barely above a raspy whisper.

"No, you won't, you just said you couldn't get them. Come here and let me help." Xena rolled her eyes as she patted the floor in front of her.

"No." Odette crossed her arms.

Something in her switched. *Because something in Xena switched.* Xena peered up through thick lashes, her jaw set in place. Odette felt her heart race suddenly. Her palms grew moist as she gripped the edge of her dress again.

"Come here, and stop being stubborn," Xena growled. "I just want to help."

"Make me!" Odette squeaked without even thinking. She backed up another step. Xena climbed to her feet. Odette's toes gripped against the wooden floors. Usually, she would get right back in Xena's face and stand her ground. *But this wasn't about the dress.* Odette swallowed loudly as she stepped back further. *They both knew this wasn't about the dress.* Xena stepped after her. Their office swallowed her as she backed into the glass windowpanes. She palmed at the surface, the runes on her nails lighting up. Xena's attention flitted between Odette's face and her hands.

"Now, *Princess*, you want to think through what you're about to do. I don't want to rip that pretty dress off you." Xena cocked a brow. *They definitely weren't talking about the dress.*

Odette bolted off the glass panes, magic air pushed her through the air and out of Xena's grip. Odette never ran away. She was too stubborn. Yet the brisk cut of AC on her cheeks as she broke across the floor filled her with tingles. Her toes dug into the wood as she pumped her arms. Her dress flew behind her. Skidding around the corner of the room, she booked it down the hall. She wouldn't make it to the elevator and get down away from Xena in enough time. Instead, she leaped up and over the railing of the hall. The freefall down to the level below knotted up her organs and left goosebumps all over her flesh. Her skirt rippled in the air as she slowed her descent.

Magic surrounded her in a gentle breeze as she landed four flights down, on the development floor. A floor full of open space, project-

covered tables, and ample space to run and hide. Odette scrambled out of the sight of the upper floors. The sound of Xena's thunderous steps filled the air behind her. Odette's heart skipped a beat as she heard Xena jump from platform to platform. Much like a jungle cat descending a large tree, Xena expertly followed Odette.

Odette booked it across the floor. She barely made it out of the development floor and into a new hallway when Xena snatched up the back of her dress. Odette's feet, already slick from running, betrayed her. Strong hands slid her across the floor. Odette twisted and planted her feet firmly into Xena's belly. Xena grappled her, taking both to the floor. Clawing her way out, her fingers pulling to clear her down the hall. Xena pounced. Odette gasped for air.

Xena picked her up by the waist, kicked a door open to their right, and tossed Odette inside. As the large wooden door slammed shut behind her, Odette fumbled around in the dark. The lights snapped on over her head. An empty room except for bookshelves full of files and one singular desk pushed up against the back wall.

"HA! I knew it! You lied. You had a desk all along!" Odette blurted out as she wheeled to face Xena.

Xena scooped her up by the waist in one arm and flopped her onto the desk, belly first. Odette's feet kicked out behind her. Her enemies large fingers went to work on freeing the buttons down the back of her gown. "A lot of nerve you have, running from me. Like I wouldn't catch you." Xena popped the buttons open one after another.

"Nerve? That's not really what I was feeling." Odette heaved for air as her fingers clawed at the desk. Xena pressed down on her shoulder blades to keep her pinned to the desk. The other hand made quick work of undoing her dress.

"I suspect you enjoyed it, making me work to get you. Shouldn't have picked such a long dress. Gave me too much to grab onto." Xena released Odette finally. Odette scrambled to stand up. The dress pooled around her instantly. A cool chill ran down her spine. Every hair stood on end. Xena pressed her torso into Odette's back, looming over her. She bent down into Odette's ear. "Now, was that so hard? Feel better now?"

Odette crossed her arms around her chest, clawing the dress up and around her exposed chest. Her bra dug into her ribs. Xena didn't do

anything else. Merely waited, her lips an inch away from Odette's ear lobe.

"And if I say yes, will you let me leave?" Odette shifted to hug the dress against her better.

"I would never force you to stay," Xena breathed. "If you say stop, we stop. You say we're done; we're done."

Odette's chest broke out in a hot blush that stung her flesh. Her grip on the dress faltered. Her lungs refused to inflate. Xena remained rigid, not looming but resting. Odette twisted an inch, her shoulder pressed into Xena's sternum. She glanced up, arms trembling. The dress fell fully to her ankles. "And we act like it never happened. At work, this never happened?"

"When we're working, we work. But when we're playing?" Xena motioned at the room with her palm, then came to rest it on Odette's cheek. Odette twisted around more. Her fingers fiddled with the edge of her own bra. Xena bent enough so that her nose brushed along Odette's forehead. Her lips pressed a tender kiss against her temples. Then Xena's fingers rushed to Odette's hair and yanked it back by the half ponytail she had it in still. Odette gasped, her hips bucking forward in response as her chin snapped up. Xena held Odette's chin up, forcing her to lock gazes with Xena. "When we play, you will have to run faster next time, because the chase is half the fun."

Odette's lips curled. The pull in her hair went lax. Xena's palms came around her cheeks and cupped her face. Odette sighed happily into the touch, "We'll have to do it somewhere more discreet than the office where we work, where there are cameras and an oracle."

"I doubt Samosa will even see that stunt you pulled." Xena nodded, "but I agree, work is work, and it'll stay work. Now, about devouring the prey that I caught?"

Odette's stomach twisted. Xena was giving her one last chance to turn back. To return to things as they were and to act like this never happened. As she drowned in Xena's amber gaze, she knew for sure that she could never go back. Once they opened that box, she would never fully get the sensation out of her system. *Plus, what could it hurt?* They were peers, at the same level, and both single, consenting women. Odette tried to make a list of pros and cons in her head, but her hands moved faster. She brushed the jacket off Xena's shoulders. It dropped to the floor behind them. Her

sharp, jagged lines of tattoos ran along with her muscles like the contour of her silver skin. Her black lace turtleneck felt painted on her skin as Odette ran her hands down her sides. Xena stiffened, her skin hardening like stone. Odette looped her fingers under the hem of the shirt. Then she tugged it up and off Xena swiftly.

“Those pasties are going to be a bitch to get off later,” Odette exhaled. Trembling fingers lined the shape of Xena’s skin-colored pasted bra. Her gaze trailed up Xena’s torso to her face.

“I need you to tell me yes or no, *Princess*.” Xena took hold of Odette’s chin between her forefinger and her thumb.

“Yes,” Odette confessed with no air in her lungs. She scooped her up by the waist with one arm and deposited her on the desk. Xena’s lips crashed on hers. Odette scrambled to pull off her own bra. Her fingers fumbled with the hooks as Xena leaned into her hard. The bra flung out of her hands and onto the floor. Xena’s free hands roamed her fully exposed chest. Odette wrapped her legs around Xena’s waist and tugged her closer.

Xena’s kiss roughened, pulling at her lower lip, and gnashing their teeth. Then it eased as she inhaled sharply through her nose. Odette’s organs twisted up in knots as Xena moved her kisses down her cheeks. Her jawline was covered in gentle nips and kisses till Xena found the crook of her throat. Odette jumped in response to her biting onto it. Clawing her fingernails down Xena’s back, Odette reveled in Xena’s shivers.

Roaming hands found the sensitive spot on the inside of her thighs, Xena brushed her fingertips near Odette’s panties. Odette ran her fingers up into Xena’s blond hair and raked her nails through her scalp. Xena growled against her throat. It warmed her insides. Squirming on the tabletop, Odette tried to press her thighs closed, untangling her legs from around her. Xena squeezed her thighs with her fingers and forced her legs open. Odette pulled back on the table, away from her teasing touch. Xena scooped up her thighs and wrenched her to the edge of the desk.

“None of that, *Princess*.” Xena rested her hands at Odette’s hips, her thumbs running along the edge of her panties. Her thumbs roamed closer until Odette jerked. Xena pressed the pad of her thumb against her sex. Softly, she circled her clit through the fabric. Hot, wet kisses on her throat stopped as she straightened up. The second kiss to her mouth seared through Odette, leaving her skin burnt to the touch. The raging blush across her chest hurt.

Xena's thumb finally dove under her panties. Hooking the fabric with two other fingers, she tugged them away from Odette's sex. Before Odette could wiggle them off, Xena snatched them with both hands and tore them into pieces. The fabric scraps fell to their feet.

"Hey!" Odette whined against her mouth.

"You can afford new ones." Xena returned her torment of Odette's clit. Circling with consistent pressure, her free hand ran the length of her lips. Odette's fingers found their way down the front of Xena's torso. Her nails glowed in between them. Xena froze for a second before finding the pasties on her chest slipping off as if they were made of wet paper. Odette smiled at her innocently. Until her thumb encircled Xena's nipples.

"You can afford new ones." Odette shrugged.

Xena pressed her forefinger inside Odette and curled it inwardly. Odette jumped as instant pleasant pressure filled her. Her mouth hung open as Xena pumped one then two digits into her. Keeping consistent circles on her clit, ensuring to curl up into Odette's walls, Odette felt herself already melt. She grabbed at Xena with her left hand. Gripping her shoulder, Odette gasped louder and louder until her mouth formed words. She chanted Xena's name as Xena rocked up against a spot Odette could never quite get with anything else. Odette's organs clenched up tightly.

"Not so lippy now, huh, *Princess*?" Xena purred.

Odette tried to say something. There was some part of her that wanted to snark something. But her legs trembled as her orgasm tied up her tongue. Her insides fluttered open and closed around Xena's fingers. Xena kissed her forehead and temple tenderly as Odette rode out her orgasm. The room closed around her as all her muscles turned to mush. Xena removed her digits steadily, making sure to run them along Odette's slit. Planting her hands on either side of Odette, she over her. Face pale except for flushed cheeks, Odette struggled to right her heavy breathing. Smugly, Xena lifted Odette's chin with two slick knuckles.

"Bet your ex never made you orgasm that hard? You look like you've nearly died." Xena scanned Odette's face with a mischievous smirk on her face.

"She's never," Odette blurted out, her lungs struggling to keep up.

"What?" Xena blinked rapidly; her mouth hung ajar. "You're joking? You asked that woman to marry you and she never made you cum?"

Odette's blush spread across her body. "Well, I- look, it wasn't-" Odette stammered through a few unintelligible words before she exhaled. "Another rule, never bring up Clara while we're naked."

"Deal. No playing at work, and no mention of the selfish ex. Got it." Xena stood straight, hands on her hips.

"Speaking of selfish." Odette popped off the desk.

"Whoa, did I say you could move?" Xena stepped back as Odette knelt in front of her. Odette's hands freed her belt and undid her suit pants. Xena's right hand scooped up Odette's mess of hair and wove her fingers through it till she could grip it. "But I do enjoy this view."

Odette rolled her eyes. Xena smirked but said nothing else as Odette slipped her pants down. Odette hesitated as she stared immediately at a scar straight across Xena's hip line. Deep into the flesh, deeper than magic could heal. The scar would be with her forever. Then she kissed the edge of Xena's stony hip. Xena's hips bucked at the touch. Odette smirked to herself before nipping at the skin, finding it softer than her muscular upper body. Xena's thigh muscles tensed as Odette ran tender kisses down from her sensitive hip to her thigh. Odette spared a squeeze to Xena's butt cheeks, giggling as Xena jerked forward at the touch.

Odette's tongue swiped up the inside of Xena's thigh.

"Okay, that's it you're having too much fun at my expense." Xena tugged her backward. Odette laughed but kissed an apology along the sensitive flesh.

Xena groaned as Odette kissed harder on her flesh. She found her way up the inside of Xena's muscles till her tongue swiped along Xena's sex. Her tongue flat against her slit, she tried firmer pressure since Xena seemed extra sensitive. Her hands rubbed rhythms into Xena's muscles as they melted into her touch. One of Xena's hands smacked down onto the desk while the other soothed circles into the back of Odette's scalp. Odette circled her clit with her tongue. A mix of a purr and moan fell off Xena's lips. Odette glanced upward. The goliath woman stared down at her with an intensity that made Odette clench her thighs tighter. Odette started a rhythm with her tongue, switching between broad strokes and short circles.

"Now I see why she didn't want to share," Xena grunted. Odette stopped and nipped at Xena's thigh. Xena hissed, "Right, right, no talking about her while we're naked. My bad."

Odette returned to her pattern, smiling to herself as Xena hung her head. Blond hair draped over them. Strong hips rutted rigidly as if she were truly afraid to hurt Odette. Until Odette spared a hand to the one in her hair. She twisted Xena's hands up in her locks more and gripped Xena's thigh harder with her free hand. Xena rocked against her, a shaky sigh falling off her lips. Then she bucked harder, making Odette's routine sloppier. But Xena's legs trembled. Her fingers closed around the mess of Odette's hair. She huffed louder. Odette kept her pace, letting Xena's stronger muscles and legs work instead. Then Xena broke into a million pieces.

Cursing in a language Odette couldn't decipher, Xena's knees broke. She pulled Odette out from under her before she sank to the floor. Odette watched, breathlessly as Xena returned from the explosive orgasm that rolled through her body. Then, inch by inch, she sat up on her knees and fixed her pants with one hand. She also paled, but the difference was that Xena didn't blush. Xena smirked as she dislodged her other hand from Odette's hair.

"Sorry, was I too rough?" Odette grimaced.

"No, you were perfect, as per usual *Princess*." Xena struggled to her feet. Odette scrambled to her own feet. Her eyes searched the office for all the pieces to her outfit. While Xena could pull the shirt and jacket on without the pasties, Odette would still be without clothes.

Until Xena lumbered to one of the bookshelves and took a huge gym bag off the top. She whisked two t-shirts and a pair of shorts out of the bag. She tossed Odette the shorts and a shirt. "Emergency backup, Internal wasn't interested in my non-descript gym bag when they cleared the offices. Go figure."

"Are these used?" Odette caught them.

"Sniff them if you don't trust me," Xena grinned from ear to ear. Odette did sniff them and found her nose full of laundry detergent. Glaring up at Xena, she tugged them on and tightened the shorts with their shoestrings. It wasn't a good fit, but she'd managed in worse.

Odette scooped up her own clothes and snapped them into the pocket dimension, cursing herself for not packing herself a spare thing of clothes to drive home in. Her keys dropped into her hands, and she sighed.

"We have work in the morning."

“Well, we’ve got just enough time to go home, scrub the tits and pits, change clothes, and come back.”

“You bring food, I’ll bring enchanted caffeine.”

“Deal.”

Chapter Ten:

Xena sat on the edge of her desk with her arms crossed. One foot propped up on her chair. Odette sat in her chair next to her, across from the skinny, ginger haired man in a plum suit. He smiled wide, stretching his freckles across his cheeks more. Jade eyes sparkled with delight as Odette went over his qualifications on his application for their assistant.

“You’re a communication’s major, minoring in business management, you took a year of draconic, aquatic, elvish, and even orcish. That is an impressive list, Alistair. It also says here that you interned with Johnson and Jibson, the toilet paper company over in Marvis, I hear they do pretty good sales given their lack of diverse inventory.” Odette folded the file closed in her lap, cocking her head to the right. “What I don’t understand is why you chose to work here for us?”

“I don’t understand, was my application abnormal?” Alistair blushed the same red as a tomato. He fidgeted with his own fingers in his lap.

“No, by all means, you’re qualified. But your, let’s say, pedigree is extensive. Your father is Dodger McMillian-”

“I knew it!” Xena exclaimed with bright eyes. “I thought the name was familiar. Your dad’s the most renowned paladin in King’s Fall history. He holds the record for slaying the mad dragon king of the south and for purifying the black sea of the abysmal kraken!” Xena exploded with glee. She bound off her desk into her seat. Sliding closer to Alistair, she examined his paling face. He looked nothing like his father. Dodger and Alistair both sported red hair the color of ripe carrots with freckles, but Dodger was a brick house. Shoulders wide enough and biceps big enough to arm wrestle werebears and win. Dodger McMillian was a chiseled faced hero that they wrote about in books.

Alistair sat awkwardly away from Xena with a wince for a smile. Six foot tall, scrawny with wide hands and smile, ears round and too big for his face, Alistair did not hold a single drop of his father’s appearance. Alistair laughed sheepishly, “Well, yes, he is known for that.”

“And your mother, Reece, is a healer known all over the world, they name hospitals after her.” Odette crossed one leg over the other. “So why

work for us. By all things considered, you'd have a far comfier job with one of their many ventures."

"Well, a man's got to eat, am I right?" He swallowed loudly, straightening out his posture in his seat. "I also wanted to branch out on my own. I'm not my parents or their accomplishments. I am trying to be independent."

Odette nodded, "I understand that."

"I mean, your father is Dean of the Warlock Academy of Deathcraft. I'm far more impressed by your pedigree." Alistair motioned at Odette.

Xena glanced at Odette and knew she was sold on the kid. Alistair may be a smidgen younger than she liked for their assistant, but she knew Odette liked him. He was smart, respectful, and clay ready for molding. They didn't have time to beat around the bush with all the work piling up on their plate. The extra hands were necessary and desperately wanted. Xena switched her attention back to Alistair.

"Well then, we're going to discuss it and get back to you by the end of the day. But it's safe to say we're both impressed by you and your applications. The last question is a formality, but when would you be able to start, slash what does your schedule look like for the next month." Xena pulled out her phone to jot down the information.

"I am free to work starting immediately. I've graduated from university and as you know left the university's librarian program and my internship, so my schedule is rather free. I will, however, need next Saturday off for a medical day. You know, doctors' appointments, dentistry, and the such. I try to put all appointments in one day a month, every 29 ish days or so, you understand." He broadened his smile genuinely, shoulders finally relaxed.

"I don't see why we can't accommodate that." Odette waved off the notion. "Though, you may ask for more time off, to spread any appointments around. Even hair appointments, rune replacement appointments, we understand. Just know this job can be," Odette trailed off with a grimace.

"Sometimes it's surprising and things happen at the drop of a hat." Xena finished Odette's thought with a pat on her right shoulder. Odette stiffened under her touch but did not flinch away. Instead, leaned into her palm more. Xena squeezed it before taking back her hand. "As you've

probably heard, we are going through the final part of our fiscal year and things are pretty go-go-go right now.”

“Oh, I heard.” Alistair flattened his palms against his thighs. “But that doesn’t scare me, a little elbow grease and being flexible is one of my specialties.”

“Glad to hear it. Make sure to check back in with the front desk to sign out and ensure your contact information is correct before you leave. And you will hear back from us later tonight on our decision.” Odette stood up from her seat. Alistair bound to his feet and extended his hand to her. Odette shook it with a smile, then pulled her seat back toward her desk.

Xena took his other handshake, making sure to squeeze firmly. He didn’t challenge her shake. *Good kid*. She grinned and patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you for coming, Alistair, have a good day.”

“Of course, thank you both for the opportunity!” He walked out of the office with his head held high.

Xena slid the chair they stole from their future assistant’s office to the side. Then she sat down on the edge of her desk again. Propping one leg up on her chair, she watched him climb into the elevator. Once he was gone behind silver doors, the office doors clicked shut with magic. Runes colored the shimmering glass with magic. Xena glanced at Odette as she sat down in her chair. “I like him.”

“Me too, he’s a good fit.” Odette pulled out her crystal pad. “So, we agree?”

“Absolutely. He’s a little young but that just means he doesn’t have any bad habits yet.” Xena pulled out her phone. Copied into the email Odette sent out to HR, they both replied to the requisition that they would hire the candidate. HR’s automated response of ‘he will begin processing once his background check clears’ dinged off both their devices.

“And he’s completely neutral, he won’t have any internalized favoritism.” Odette pulled out the next evaluation they were going to conduct in about an hour. They were almost done with the knight’s portion, saving all the magical department heads for the next day. Odette scooped her red tendrils up into a ponytail upon her head.

Xena’s attention snapped to the hickey on the left side of her throat. Fire returned to her veins as Odette rubbed her own shoulders, leaning hard into her desk. Rolling her head around to crack the joints in her neck and shoulders. Her breasts were propped up on the desk in her droop-neck

sweater. She'd worn a knit sweater that draped her shoulders in rich emerald. Pairing it with a poofy black skirt over stockings. Xena immediately noticed the garter straps that morning as Odette clambered out of her car. She reminded herself they made rule number one for a reason. However, it didn't stop her starved wolf tendency to stare when Odette moved to sit on her legs in her seat.

"You, um, missed one," Xena swallowed. She pointed a finger at Odette's throat.

"I know, it's the rather stubborn flesh wound. Not even my runes could fade it. I kept my hair down today to ensure it was covered but it's so heavy some days." Odette stretched her arms over her head, arching her back.

Xena shivered at Odette's low moan at the crack of her lower back. Gritting her teeth and clenching her fists, she reminded herself she was a professional. They had far too much work today to even consider fooling around. Besides, Odette didn't even give her the indication she felt nearly as horny as Xena felt. The can of worms they opened only consumed her more. Xena pushed off her desk and rounded her desk.

Their emails dinged with another response. Xena furrowed her brows, "The background checks never run this fast."

"Maybe he's a war criminal and they're detaining him in the lobby," Odette snickered. She pulled her chair up to the desk to look at her crystal pad.

Xena rolled her eyes as she opened the email. Her stomach clenched, "It's from Ash."

"What!" Odette flipped open her crystal pad. "Hello Xena and Odette, I am pleased to know my choices for VP are performing with top marks. The shareholders and our CEO are impressed with the work and dedication you have shown. Which is why I am so shocked to hear from HR that the replacement for Magical Development has *still* not been chosen or even started processing. I assume it is because there are too many applicants, and you are doing your due diligence. I am emailing to remind you both that you are only required to interview three applicants before making a decision. Ensure this applicant is in the process of promotion by the end of day tomorrow. Thank you again for your diligence with the Evaluations, Payroll and HR are very pleased with the speed and accuracy you two have shown. Ash."

Xena blinked, then glanced up from her own phone. "Wait, just a second, you didn't pick a replacement yet? Still thinking you'll lose the job and be demoted?" Xena smirked.

"Don't be ridiculous, I am not being demoted. I just haven't chosen someone to replace me," Odette scoffed. She slid her crystal pad away from her. Tapping her fingers across the top of the desk, her eyes searched the air around her for something.

"Well, whoever you liked best is going to have to be good enough. Xagu starts Monday and you need to have someone starting Monday as well, or else Ash will have our hides." Xena flopped back in her seat. *Not picked her replacement?* Xena hadn't even thought to check if Odette picked a replacement. Granted they didn't necessarily have time to discuss it recently. They'd been stuck between job and scandals. Xena eyed Odette, who returned a glare of her own.

"I will *not* just *pick* a random person to take up Magical Development Department Head." Odette clawed her nails across the top of the desk.

"It's not like picking a government official, it's a manager that we will train to do the job, so just pick someone." Xena tossed her arms out.

"That is easy for you to say in your position, what all did you even do as Department head? Go around scooping up people who need a job off the street and make them work out twenty-four seven?" She sneered, talking with her hands aggressively.

"You and I both know you're being ridiculous right now." Xena cocked a brow, crossing her arms. Her jaw locked hard as she resisted the urge to berate Odette for what she did as Department head.

"Do I? Unlike you, I was the reason many dangerous magical devices and spells didn't see the light of day. Whoever takes development has to be rational, level-headed, and responsible. They need to think about liability and profit. Something might be a good development but not make money or vice versa. They need to be the deciding factor and they need to ensure the team keeps up with integrity and work ethic. They can't just be anybody." Odette tapped her fingers against the desk. "Everyone who interviewed was more interested in making money and not developing the company. I wasn't about to put my seal of approval on money or fame chasers."

"I think you're thinking too hard on it," Xena sighed. "What's wrong with wanting to make the company more money or even more famous? I

like Xagu's ideas because he's wanting to expand us, to make us more money and more notoriety."

"I think you're taking this too lightly." Odette pushed away from her desk. Snapping to her feet, she snatched up her crystal pad. "You wouldn't understand."

"Is it because my barbarian brute brain wouldn't understand the complexities of magic?" Xena stood, stepping in the direction of the door. Odette glared up at her with her crystal pad clutched to her chest. Xena crossed her arms over her chest, "You don't think that-"

"Magic is deadly when not kept in check! It kills children every day! And you wouldn't understand because you think magic is stupid!" Odette tossed the crystal pad out of her hand and into a different plane of existence. Steam floated up from her hands as she clenched her fists hard enough, they shook. "Magic is not stupid! And I'm not stupid! I know what happens when you're irresponsible or have bad intentions. So sorry I didn't have an award-winning applicant in the pool of applicants the first time, like someone."

Xena unfolded her hands, "I never said you were stupid."

"You were thinking it! Now move-"

"How would you know how I think?" Xena put her hands to her thighs and bent over to get eye to eye with Odette.

"Get out of my face." Odette lowered her voice as fire ignited in her hands.

"I will when you calm down." Xena glanced at the flames licking up Odette's arms.

Odette inhaled sharply. Xena raised her right brow only. Her Fae nemesis scowled, exhaling slower, the flames crawling down toward her wrist. Xena glanced at the flames a second time before her eyes stared at Odette expectantly. Odette's jaw locked hard. Smoke wafted around them as the flames died with a steady hiss. Then her nails and fingers stopped smoking. Xena stepped out from in front of the door.

Odette froze. Xena towered over her, eyes locking in at the top of Odette's head. She ripped her ponytail out of her hair and ruffled her hair out around her. Snapping the band against her wrist, she broke the spell over the doors. Yet, she waited in the doorway. Xena pulled the door open toward her.

"I am sorry, I didn't know," Xena murmured.

“I am sorry for my dramatics.” Odette stepped out through the open doorway.

“You mispronounced passion and care.” Xena lingered beside the door. Odette stopped mid-step, her fingers curling around her skirt. Xena stepped away from the door toward her desk. When she sat down at her seat, Odette twisted around on her heels. Marching back inside the room, she stopped inches away from Xena. Xena stared up into her puzzled expression. Odette planted her hands on her waist. Xena waited for her to speak. She didn’t. With a sigh, Xena twisted fully so she sat facing Odette, kicking one leg up and over the other. “Yes?”

“Why did you do that?” Odette analyzed her face, her blue orbs scanning every inch of her with disbelief.

“Do what?” Xena gawked.

“Correct me.” Odette narrowed her eyes.

“Because it’s not dramatic to care?” Xena tapped her fingers against her thigh, unsure where Odette was going with her question. Xena enjoyed it when they bickered. Honestly, it felt fun. But fighting Odette was like fist fighting a fire giant. No one ever won and she always left with burn marks. “I thought you were trying to demean me, turns out you just care a lot. I understand that I was lucky to find someone the first time, but we’ve got a boss who demands results, and we don’t have a lot of time. So, I get that you have to find the right person. Please find them quickly?”

Odette whirled away. She took *maybe* four steps toward the door before she whipped back around. She raised a finger and opened her mouth to speak.

“Just go!” Xena barked.

“Excuse you.” Odette dropped the hand.

“You’re the one with the attitude here. Get out of here and find your replacement or I will.” Xena twisted toward her desk. She untucked her phone from her pocket and opened her files for the eval again. “And you won’t like who I choose.”



Odette stood to shake the hand of her last interviewee. Thankfully HR pulled more applicants for her to look through, some that Odette had not considered the first go-round. Her last applicant would be her last hope at this point. One of the people spoke of having no idea how to cast magic. At the very least, her last applicant had a magical background. She sat down across from a purple Tiefling with curled goat horns. Dressed in a modest turtleneck under a black blazer and slacks, gold rings and a delicate chain belt as the real accents of their outfit. Odette glanced at the file.

“So, Sky, you are an external applicant, what made you choose K&M?” Odette flipped through the app she barely had a chance to peruse prior to their arrival.

“To be completely honest, Knights&Mage is the only company I’ve come across that hasn’t completely forsaken their moral code for profit. I’ve worked for a few of your competitors as a magical developer and quit every time one of them demanded I forsake safety for profit. In the last five years, K&M has stood out to me as the industry standard, or what should be the standard for products. Your healing runes marketed as your top-selling product despite how much I know those wands and swords make your company is what sold me.” Sky folded their long fingers over the table.

Odette clamped her mouth shut. Her attention snapped up to Sky’s round face. Sky kept their hair braided down their back and their horns shiny but did not wear makeup. Their soft face turned stony as Odette chewed on the inside of her cheek.

“Who told you about this position?” She sat back in her seat. The coincidence gnawed at her stomach like a rabid animal trying to escape. She crossed one leg over the other, hands sat in her lap neatly.

Sky’s eyes shifted away. Then with a sigh, they produced their crystal phone. On the front of the screen was a group photo. Odette didn’t need to stare long before she found her brother standing beside Sky. Big goofy smile, arm draped around Sky’s shoulder, holding babies of some unknown species.

“My brother.” Odette licked her lips. “You do know this doesn’t give you an advantage. I would not give him any more consideration than anyone else. Your friendship with him is just a consideration for me.”

“Your brother is a revolutionary, working to stop the damaging spread of adventuring into wilds we do not understand.” Sky pocketed their phone. “But I’m not here because he told me to apply, or that I even imagined you would hire me solely because I’m friends and a colleague with your brother. In fact, I came here in spite of your brother’s wishes that no one he knows applies for your old position.”

“He told you not to apply?” Odette cocked a brow.

“He told all of us, but specifically me not to apply after explaining you’d been promoted. He knows how much I want to stop the damage before it even hits the streets. Cleaning up corporate messes doesn’t interest me as much as getting ahead of the damage. No need to clean wounds if they’re not created.” Sky sat back, mimicking Odette’s posture in her seat.

She scanned over Sky’s features. Truly it did not surprise her that Sky worked with her brother on one of his many save-the-world adventures. Charming did everything to stop people from hurting strangers, especially if they were animals. He spent most of their childhood trying to nurse every animal he found back to health. Maybe their mother influenced him too much, babying him more than the rest of the girls. Odette relaxed her shoulders, stretching to take up Sky’s file. Setting it in her lap, she scanned it again.

“It’s a lot of balancing. Balancing innovation with responsibility, and you’ll be the head of the department. So, you need to know the job is more about ensuring quality and approving things for sale or for auction. And this isn’t like working for any of my competitors, I run a tight ship and I do not allow any of my employees to coup the management. I also will not tolerate you running to tell Charming about anything that happens here. You can be friends, even best friends with him, but I only allow professionals to work here. Will that be a problem?” Odette flipped the page on Sky’s folder.

“Not at all. I appreciate your honesty,” Sky smiled.

“And I expect you to stick around if you find something you don’t agree with. No quitting just because something isn’t up to your standard. We are a solution-based team, not a reaction.” Odette cocked a brow as she glanced up from the file.

“That is fair and reasonable, I believe I will be able to accommodate that, as long as you hear me out if I bring something to your attention.”

Sky met her gaze, unwavering.

“I am all ears and as I said, I run a tight ship. If you come to me with a comment, question, or concern, I will not turn you away or snub your concern.” Odette could hear the comment of Ash’s review in her ears. She didn’t want the words to be true, that others feared coming to her. Odette, however, had no evidence that was true. Evelyn sure wasn’t afraid of her. Gilga came to her with her information without fear. Marc spoke to her candidly. She would need to continue her work on her image with her employees. Starting with Sky, no one would be afraid to come to her with questions or concerns. She might not give them the answer they wanted, but she would be fair.

Sky grinned, “That’s great to hear.”

“Now, to be fair, you’re the most impressive candidate I’ve had for this position. I need someone who is analytical and responsible. But I want you to understand that we are a business. And as my co-Vice President will tell you, we need to make money to spend it, so keep that in mind. I appreciate your extracurricular work, and all of the charities you’ve worked for I also donate to when I am able. Though, you can thank Charming for letting me know about them. What questions do you have for me?” Odette closed the file in her lap.

“When do I start?” Sky chuckled.

“Confident, I appreciate that. I will have to clear it with HR, but the position would start Monday morning. Now, if you were chosen, you would have to start technically Friday to come in and sign internal paperwork, go through our general employee training, and take a tour of the facility. Then you would start Monday morning with training for the position. I would pair you up with Evelyn, who is head of Magical Research, and have you shadow her for the day to see what it’s truly like on your feet here.” Odette slid to her feet and put her hand out to Sky. “You will receive an answer by the end of the day.”

“Thank you very much.” Sky shook Odette’s hand firmly but bowed as they stepped away. “Should I wait to tell Charming?”

Odette snorted, “Honestly, even telling him you applied will get you an ear full, so that is your funeral.”

Sky chuckled as they sauntered out of the room. Odette waited till they were at the elevator. She chewed on her thumbnail, dropping the folder to the table. Staring at it did not help the unease in her stomach. Sky was a

chance, maybe a good idea, possibly a bad one. Sky did not fit her usual parameters for the applicant she wanted. But had she not been in a shrieking match with Xena about how the person needed to be more than a business person? *Had to be more than a power-hungry or promotion-happy person?* Sky could be her newest legacy or a mess of paperwork.

Odette sighed before snapping her crystal pad back into her hand. She flipped it open and replied to HR with her acceptance of Sky Miller as her pick for the position. HR responded with their automatic response, but a weird, tingly feeling flooded her system. She'd picked someone. She finally did it. So why did she feel weightless and dizzy? Odette sank into the chair.

It was official. She'd been promoted, she was Vice President. *There was no going back now.* If she messed up or ruined it somehow, she would not go back to Department Head. The finality of the situation sank into her skin like bricks. Odette tapped her fingers against the table.

"Oh, Hey, Odette?"

She jumped in her skin, glancing up at Nancy, the building secretary, poking into the room. Nancy smiled sheepishly before shuffling inside. "There's a gentleman in the foyer without his I.D. saying he's your father?"

Odette crumbled back in her seat. Her hands slapped against her forehead and dragged them down her face. She loudly groaned, "what does he look like?"

Nancy pulled up a photo on her phone. On the screen smiled a salt and pepper curly-haired man with a full beard in a flowing black cape. Her father, Tom Plum, grinned like a child caught in the middle of playing and told to hold still. Odette sighed and nodded.

"That's my father, I'll go out there to meet him. I need to eat something anyway." She pulled herself out of her chair and followed Nancy toward the lobby. Nancy returned to responding to emails and sending messages from her phone. Odette fidgeted with her own hands and her bare ring finger.

During the whole time since the night of the ball, she hadn't even thought to tell her parents about it. She hadn't even considered Clara's absence until she was alone with her own thoughts. *Let alone respond to Clara's mom's text.* She tried calling three times last night. Odette ignored them. Even at home, she wasn't alone in her head as the work didn't stop.

Answering external emails about the reporter interview and tour, and answering internal emails about Chatterbee and Daphne, she didn't have a second to inhale. Clara's spare clothes were still piled in the dirty clothes hamper in her hallway. The special perfume she always wore sat on her nightstand and her tequila was still on top of the fridge. Odette spun an invisible ring around her naked finger. Her father had not noticed her missing ring when she visited last. But he hadn't even asked about Clara. *Maybe he knew?* Or he was too busy with his students to notice.

Odette stepped out into the foyer of the building, swallowing her tongue. Her father loomed near the front desk, pouring over a massive tomb. A vaulted ceiling, full of open windows of shimmering crystal, sunlight, and globes of light illuminated the lobby. The light painted shadows on his face as he scanned over an inky page. Unlike the fashion-forward, business professionals who weaved around him in the building, Tom Plum stuck out like a ghost in a new house. Dark travel robe, thick boots, and an obsidian eye decorating a chain along his waist.

"Dad, you look like a specter." Odette crossed her arms as she stepped up beside her father.

"Good, then I will never be missed." Her father wheeled to face her. He wrapped his arms around her. Vanilla, thyme, and hints of musk filled her nostrils while she picked baby's breath that grew inside his hood. The flowers shriveled up in her touch and fell off. Her mother's blessings to keep him from harm grew into baby's breath when she worried. Tom pulled back an arm's length to glance over Odette. "Hello Odette, how is my favorite VP?"

"I've been better. We're kind of busy. But I need to grab some lunch, you feel like walking down the street with me?" She smiled, holding in the spew of information she wanted to say. She couldn't tell him about the interviews or her replacement. Company policy kept her from telling him about Chatterbee and Daphne. The emotional rollercoaster she held back by sheer force of will kept her from immediately blurting out about Clara. She swallowed all of it as he beamed back at her. Throwing an arm over her shoulder, he wheeled her toward the front door.

"I'm always down for food." He patted her opposite arm.

"How's mom?" Odette poked at regular conversation. Her skin itched as she realized there were no screaming kids or magic mistakes to distract from her father's full attention.

Tom folded the tomb into his cloak, the book disappearing. Then Tom pulled her closer for a squeeze. “She’s good, a bit worried, as you could tell.”

“Yeah, baby’s breath,” Odette laughed sheepishly as she picked another flower from his hair.

“And your siblings are good too. Aurora’s almost done with her painting I think, and Belle sent home a letter from the university about how well her students are doing. But you would probably know about them better. You kids have always been so close.” The kids *had* always been close. Odette tried not to focus hard on the emotional stab to her abdomen. Tom let Odette lead them down the packed sidewalk toward her favorite lunch spot only a block down the road. A hole-in-the-wall restaurant was carved out in the back of a furniture store. They sold everything fresh, and their tea warmed the soul without a drop of magic.

Odette ruffled her father’s hair for good measure. Staring up at him exposed the dark circles forming under his eyes. The hollow of his cheeks that his beard usually covered up were gaunter. They stopped a few feet from the building at the corner. Tom froze as Odette’s eyes fell to the tattoo along his throat. His contract with his patron, his physical representation of his deal, darkened with a purple bruise. Odette resisted her urge to poke at it as she often did as a child.

“Dad.” Her lungs constricted. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, can’t a father come to surprise his daughter?” He grinned a weak grin, unable to make it reach his eyes. Odette’s hands trembled as she stepped back from him and his arm around her. His cloak, pushed back, allowed her to see how truly skinny he’d become. *Had he been this skinny and drawn out when she visited?*

“No, he can’t, because this is the first time you’ve done it.” Her jaw locked up as her emotions wrapped around her throat like a tight scarf. Tightening inch by inch till dots formed in the corners of her eyes, Odette struggled to breathe. “You’ve never made time to come see me, I’ve always come to see you.”

“Well, you’re all the way here in the city, and the academy is always so-”

“Always so busy.” Odette finished his words, her lips dried enough to crack. Their eyes locked together as she tried not to rip her own fingers off

her hands. She licked her lips, “Yeah, I know. With seven kids and a whole school to deal with, when would you ever have time for me.”

“Odette, that’s a bit much, don’t you?” He raked his hands through his hair.

“What did you ask him for? What did you need so desperately that you’d give more of yourself to him?” Odette motioned at his neck. Her eyebrows knitted down on her face. Vomit pressed against her esophagus. She no longer wanted to eat.

“You’ve always been so observant.” He stepped closer to her, allowing other people to cross the sidewalk around them. Tom hugged himself under his cloak. “How did-”

“You look like you’ve been sucked dry.” Odette cut him off with a scowl, her lips trembling as she gripped the front of his cloak. She pulled it taut around him.

“The school is in trouble,” He confessed, slipping his hands out from around him to take up her hands. “We’re in the red, we lost our last patron. Apparently, they died, and the family estate began to look into his expenses. Not a lot of people invest in children anymore, especially when they can’t make a profit from it.”

Odette squeezed his hand tightly. “So you what? Told him you’d what? Give him more? He already took so much.”

“I gave him a few years of my life.” Tom glanced to the ground, the bruises around his contract stared Odette in the face.

“Your life? The life that mom agreed to share with you!” Odette wrenched her hands back.

“Odette, it’s not enough. We need money. He gave us enough to have food and pay through the winter but we need a sponsor. I came to see if K&M could sponsor us. If a company like yours announces a partnership I’m sure other places will too. We could afford to stay open.”

Odette froze as she stared into her father’s hollow eyes. Tears welled up in his lids. He never looked tired before, yet all she could see was an exhausted, old man. Tom Plum held his hands out to her, begging her to agree. Odette took up his hands and clutched them close to her. If it were up to her, she would agree in a heartbeat. But her mind returned to her partner in their office, currently going over an evaluation with Chandler. A woman who didn’t understand a thing about magic. Would she agree to sponsor the school, knowing it wouldn’t make the company a dime? It

wouldn't even get them notoriety. Not in the way that impressed shareholders or even Ash.

"I want to, but it's not up to me." Odette clenched his hands. "I can write you a check, that ought to help for a little bit while I work on getting the company to help out."

"I do not wish to put you in a position that could cost you anything." Her father kissed her knuckles tenderly.

"It won't. I suddenly have a larger budget than I've had before. Especially since I'm not planning a wedding, anymore." Odette tugged him with her toward the restaurant. She would at least feed him before she sent him back to the academy. She needed time to approach the subject with Xena and PR and accounting. Odette would need to speak with her siblings to see what they could all pull together. Charming didn't make much money, but he worked with many big names. *Maybe they could pull strings.* Aurora could sell some of her artwork to make more money for the school, or maybe get one of her art collectors to sponsor the school for something. Belle might be able to find some sponsors of her university who know others. There was no hope for Giselle as she had only recently graduated from school. Odette ran down the list of everyone she knew and all of whom her siblings knew.

"Wedding?" Her father jerked her out of her own mind.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it's not happening anymore." Odette pulled the door to the restaurant open.

"Honey, you can't say that. You will still find true love someday, don't lose hope. But it's a little bit bad luck to plan a wedding before you've even dated someone." He kissed her temple. "Now what's good here?"

Odette's left eye twitched as she held the internal screams within her skull.

Odette faked a customer service smile as she ordered for them and paid. As her father sat down with their hot teas, she hesitated near the counter. *How often had she written home about Clara?* At least three times she told her mother she'd asked Clara to marry her, and Clara said yes. Most of the staff was there when Odette brought Clara to dinner at the academy. She glanced at her father, sitting at a tiny plastic table. He grinned up at her then pulled out his tomb and set it out in his lap. Pouring over it, he whispered things under his breath. Odette's ring finger ached as

she stared down at her hand. The indent on her finger had finally faded yet she could feel it there on her flesh.

The bell of their food coming up filled the air. Odette took the tray the employee offered full of their food and sat down with her father. A ding from her pocket dimension reminded her that work never stopped. Pulling out her crystal pad she stared at the first email on her screen.

From: Xena Battlemoar

To: Odette Plum

Nancy said you went to grab lunch with your dad. I know you went to get that hole-in-the-wall rice bowl stuff. Can I get their crispy bowl? You can put it on the company card.

Odette stifled a smile as she shoveled a spoon full of food into her mouth. She dabbed her fingers dry on a napkin before responding.

From: Odette Plum

To: Xena Battlemoar

You do know that Samosa sees these emails, right?

-Odette Plum

Vice President **Knights&Mage Inc.**

Odette slid to her feet to order at the counter. Before she even asked the employee to make a to-go order, an immediate response hit her inbox.

From: Xena Battlemoar

To: Odette Plum

CC: Samosa Carnic

Samosa, stop reading my emails. Odette, bring me food.

Odette choked on her own spit as she handed the poor employee her card. The employee asked if she was okay. Odette shook her head, "I'm fine, just, reading something ridiculous. Can I have a crispy bowl to go? A coworker heard I was coming."

"Ah, I get it. You work for K&M, right? I see you in here all the time. Well, I see all of you in here all the time. Your company is like our number one customer." The employee chuckled.

“You make good food, it’s close, and it’s easy to eat on the go. Absolute perfect.” Odette took back her card when it was offered before poking it in her pocket. Her email dinged again.

From: Samosa Carnic

To: Odette Plum, Xena Battlemoar

Can I get their ‘under the sea’ bowl? Extra sauce. I didn’t see a thing.

Odette groaned but pulled her card back out. “I’m going to need another to-go. An under the sea bowl, extra sauce.”

“It’s like gum, once they hear you’re getting food, they all want some.” The employee took her card again.

“This is exactly why I hide my gum.” She paid and left the counter. Sitting back down with her own food, she glanced up at her father. He ate food without ever peering up at the food or her. His eyes were on the book floating beside him. A new study on spell circles and their effects on different materials used. He tapped at spots in the book, ink appearing on the page and underlining where he pointed. Odette sipped her tea and tried not to focus on the growing space between them. Instead, she opened her email and responded that both were ordered, and they both owed her food in the future. That’s when a private text appeared on her screen from Xena.

‘Dinner then? Tomorrow night at the pub? Bring Rufus.’

Odette’s insides tightened, her fingers hovering over the text.

“What you got there?” Her father’s voice smacked her like a battle mace to the side of the skull. Odette fumbled with the crystal pad, hugging it to her chest. *As if he’d caught her with a banned book or illegal goods.* Her face burned hot red. Tom cocked up both his brows in shock. He froze mid-scoop of food into his mouth as he stared at his daughter. Odette laughed sheepishly and lowered the crystal pad.

“I have a date,” She exhaled.

“See! Told you, bad luck to imagine things into existence. The second you let go, the suitors flow in,” He teased, reaching over to poke her on the nose.

Odette became intensely aware of the hickey on her throat at that moment. Pulling her hair closer around her throat than before, she picked at her food. Everything in her twisted up in knots. Her father smiled warmly, tucking more food into his mouth. Odette cleared her throat, “She wants me to bring Rufus.”

“Excellent, an animal lover will go far with this family. However, make sure that if things get serious, she needs to have a talk with me. I’m the cool dad but one slip up, and into the void they go!” He wiggled his fuzzy brows at her. Odette snorted hard with laughter. Tom brimmed with pride as he returned to his bowl and book. Odette watched him for a long moment. Even after the employee brought her to-go orders.

“I love you, dad,” Odette murmured.

“Love you too, kiddo.” He glanced at her in between bites and paragraphs to poke her nose again. “Go on, get back to work. We both know this family is too much of a work-a-holic to hold you here. I’ll pop back home.”

“And I’ll transfer funds to the school account when I get to work. I’ll keep you and mom posted about the sponsorship, okay.” She reached out and took his hand. Her father’s tomb fell out of the air into his lap. He squeezed her hand affectionately.

“You’re a life-saver, Odette.”

Chapter Eleven:

“No, I’m not laughing, I’m just curious as to what could have happened to change you from hating this woman’s guts to now inviting her out to drinks and dinner here? In your space?” Minx cackled from behind his paws as Xena tossed toothpicks at him. All his siblings joined in the fun, attempting to get one to stick in Minx’s coarse fur. He avoided them with nimble expertise and fancy footwork behind the bar.

“She’s different now.” Xena used her pointer finger to steady the toothpick against the bar and flicked it with the other hand. The pick flew with deadly precision and caught itself in Minx’s extra fluffy beard. All the brothers and Fred, the human bartender, cheered. Minx swatted the toothpick off his face. The brother’s Katto tails flicked with excitement behind them as they returned to their original tasks of serving customers.

“Is she different or have you just accepted your fondness for her?” Minx took out a frosty beer bottle from the cooler behind the bar. He popped the top with a claw and slid it across the countertop.

“I am not fond of her.” Xena rolled her eyes, tossing the beer back and swallowing a frothy swig.

“I repeat, you invited her out to drinks and dinner here.” Minx tipped the base of Xena’s beer. Froth spilled over her face and raided her nostrils. Xena sputtered, knocking the beer bottle into the counter. Minx chortled as he avoided slaps from Xena. She dried her face on a fresh bar towel Minx hadn’t put in the sanitizer bucket yet. Then she threw it at him.

“Keep your whiskers out of my business, alright.” Xena pointed at him.

“Stop griping about your girlfriend at my bar then,” Minx mocked, paws on his hips and head cocked to the side. Xena launched over the bar at him. The Katto howled as he avoided her snatch. She grabbed up the ice scoop and tossed it at him. Ice cubes flew over Minx’s head. One of his brothers took the scoop back to fill a new glass with ice. Minx chucked a half-melted cube back at Xena.

“What are you, a child?” Fred handed her a new beer bottle.

“Sometimes, mostly when that bastard tries my patience.” Xena pointed at Minx with the lip of her new beer bottle. She handed Fred a tip,

“Thanks for the new one, seeing as someone poured the other up my nose.”

“No problem,” Fred snickered as he moved to another person at the bar.

“Hellhound! Ten o’clock!” Minx announced, pointing at the front door.

Xena’s phone lit up with a notification. She caught the shadow of fire dancing in the stained-glass windows. A wine glass full of Rose’ was settled next to her other hand. Xena glared at Minx but slid another tip across the bar. Minx shook his head. Xena flicked it at Fred who took it shamelessly. “And an Apple Ale for the hound, frosty cup please.”

“Is that what hellhounds drink?” Minx scoffed, buffeted back as if he were attacked.

“It’s better than the piss you drink.” Xena winked at Minx as she took up both drinks toward the door. She made sure to pocket her phone and head out into the cooler night air. She wore a leather jacket this time, insulated with a faux fur trim around the collar. Her black jeans tucked into her usual combat boots and a top she hadn’t worn in a long time. A green silk halter top draped around her. She bought it because it showed off her tattoos and her biceps. But it was far from work-appropriate, and it was not safe for farm life. It finally saw use again when she dove into her closet to find something to wear for dinner.

Odette said yes. Xena expected her to give a little fight on the matter. *Maybe she meant what she put in her email about them owing her food.* Either way, Xena appreciated another excuse to wear her good clothes and spend a night out. It helped that she made her own hours and communicated that she would be in late tomorrow. Plus, it would be Odette’s day off. That would let Xena train Alistair without Odette’s micromanaging. It also gave her a day to stop in and see Xagu’s progress. She could talk to Marc about other training programs. The idea of work made her dizzy. Yet, it didn’t overwhelm her as much when she stepped out the front door and found Odette settling into the outdoor patio.

Her red hair was up in a ponytail, tendrils of it fell to frame her face. She smushed her face into the top of Rufus’ head. She wore a sweater dress over stockings and knee-high boots. The dress hugged every curve on her body and Xena appreciated the generous view. Odette straightened as Xena cleared her throat, stepping into the patio.

“The ale is coming for our main man here.” Xena handed Odette the wine glass. “Hope you don’t mind, I ordered for all of us.”

“Did you get me wimpy wings or good wings?” Odette cocked her hip out, taking the glass in one hand.

“You think so little of me?” Xena scoffed. She toed the chair at the table out and flopped down into it. Odette slid down into her seat gingerly. Xena spread her legs out in the chair and patted the meat of her thigh. Rufus bound at her, tossing his paws up onto her left leg. Xena set her bottle down onto the table so she could double-handedly ruffle his flaming fur. The golden collar with a blue knit sweater bow glowed with magic. “You enchanted the collar?”

“Yes, because I know people can’t resist touching animals, even if he’s a bit spooky to catch in a dark alley. So, to ensure I don’t get sued for some idiot’s crotch goblin’s burnt fingers, I make all his bows and collars enchanted with anti-burning magic.” Odette sipped her wine steadily with a smirk. She set the glass down against the table and patted her own thigh. Rufus ripped from Xena’s hands and scurried to her side. She raised a hand. He sat up perfectly. Then she put her hand out to him. He put his paw into her palm. Then she shook his hand and tossed him something out of her purse. His flames sparked with greens and purples as he chewed on something before turning back to its natural flame.

Xena’s mouth hung open. Odette flashed her a smug smirk before holding out another treat.

“Speak.”

Rufus barked, his butt wiggling and tail wagging a million miles a minute.

“Take a seat, Rufus.” She pointed at the free chair at the table. Rufus rushed to take a seat at the table. Xena leaned back in her chair, hand over her open mouth. Watching the dog settle into the seat and catch the treat that turned his flames pink and baby blue for a moment. Then Odette pulled out a frisbee and set it on the table for him. Rufus watched it intensely.

“What’s the frisbee do?” Xena slid her chair closer to the table.

“When he sits at the table, it’s his plate. He knows that the only thing he can eat is on the frisbee. It makes him feel like a people. Who’s a good people Rufus?” Odette ruffled his face with her hands. He stuck his whole tongue out of his face and leaned into her hands.

The windows to the pub opened as yellow buckets floated through the air toward them. Xena reached up and snagged them out of the sky. Odette

tucked Rufus closer to the table. Xena took the raw porterhouse steak and plopped it onto the frisbee. She expected him to snatch it. Yet Rufus sat back in the seat, watching the steak with feverous intensity.

“Good Rufus, okay, you can eat.” Odette took up the massive frosty mug of ale and set it on the table next to the frisbee. Rufus dug into the steak. Flinging himself out of the chair, he broke across the patio and flung it around away from Odette and Xena.

“What else have you taught him? Can he do my taxes?” Xena put the flaming red wings in front of Odette and the darker brown, smokier sauced ones in front of her.

“I told you, they’re incredibly intelligent. He loves learning new commands. I also have him bring me water bottles out of the fridge sometimes when I don’t want to get out of bed.” Odette wiggled happily in her seat. She tucked a napkin into the neck of her dress and onto her lap before taking one up. Biting into it, she swayed happily. “So good.”

“How does a Fae come to like spicy food?” Xena pulled the meat off the bones of her wings. She licked the sauce off her fingers.

“My mom loves food, always has. She cooks every day at the academy if she can manage it. I love spicy and not spicy, if it’s tasty and has flavor, I like it.” She dabbed at her lips with a napkin. “I thought Goliath’s only like raw meat and eating rocks?”

“Ha! Ha! We only eat rocks as children to strengthen our jaws,” Xena sneered. “And raw meat will absolutely ruin my stomach, so I’ll stay with my cooked wings.”

“Says the woman drinking barley water. What does that even taste like?” Odette snatched up Xena’s beer bottle. Xena sat back to watch her take a sniff, then a tender sip. Odette’s face pinched upon contact and she audibly gagged. She slid the beer bottle back across the table.

“What? You don’t like it?” Xena stuck her tongue out before she tossed back a swig.

“That tastes like urine.” Odette washed it down with her own wine vigorously. She swished it back and forth in her mouth before swallowing with a grimace. She smacked her lips with disgust before filling her mouth with wings. Her eyebrows and face finally unpinched as she covered up the flavor with something else.

Xena snickered to herself the entire time Odette worked to cover up the beer flavor. “And how would you know what urine tastes like?” She

tapped her right boot against Odette's.

"You're a child, and I won't even feign a response to that one," Odette scowled.

"Aw come on, one horror story. From one woman fucker to another." Xena tapped their boots again. Odette kicked her in the shin. Xena kicked her back, however, significantly lighter than she could have.

Rufus finally rejoined them at the table. Licking his paws with a distinguished, calm look on his face unlike the raw glee he expressed earlier. Then Odette put the mug of ale onto his frisbee. He lapped it up happily, tail wagging against the back of the seat.

"You are so crude." Odette rolled her eyes. "But yes, I have actually made a girl... pee. I didn't mean to, she forgot to pee before, we were young and naïve."

"There it is, and where did Odette even find a young, proper girl to experiment on? The Academy of fancy smancy magic?" Xena dried her hands off on a napkin.

"The Warlock Academy of Deathcraft." Odette corrected as she took another sip of her wine.

"I'm sorry, the Warlock Academy of spooky, scary edgy magic that people send their rich kids to study at." Xena held up her hands in defense.

"Is that what you think it is? A fancy school for rich kids?" Odette's eyes widened as she froze in her seat.

"I mean, your parents are loaded so I can-" Xena didn't even get to finish speaking before Odette broke out into mad laughter, snorting and kicking her feet against the ground. Xena blinked rapidly, confusion filling her features as Odette broke. Tears welled in her eyes as Odette gasped for air and laughed harder. Xena waited patiently for Odette to sober up. "Was it something I said?"

"My parents aren't loaded, by any means. I mean, the idea that my parents have *any* money is laughable, let alone loaded!" Odette gasped for air, drying her tears off with the back of her hand. "Especially given current circumstances."

"What does that mean? Aren't you the headmaster's daughter or something?" Xena folded her hands onto the table as she leaned closer to the tabletop.

"I am one of *seven* children of the headmaster, yes. But he was a professor there for most of my youth. A headmaster who runs a charity,

nonprofit academy for warlock children who are often orphaned and abandoned at the school. Even if the school wasn't a charity case of its own, my father and mother lived on professor and nurse salaries for most of my childhood, and we grew up at the school because it was free housing because they worked there. We ate every day because the school fed us. I grew up poor. *Dirt poor.*" Odette inhaled then exhaled slowly as she regulated her pockets of giggles. She took a long sip of her wine. "Thanks, I needed that."

"But you- no, wait, no you are not telling me you, miss prim and proper and prissy ex who only owns designer grew up poor." Xena spiraled as she tried to imagine Odette as anything other than a rich kid.

Odette eyed Xena with confusion. "I'm wealthy because I'm good with finances and I took a high paying job at a well-paying company with benefits. And Clara is a whole other issue I don't wish to divulge into but, yes, I earned my money. I only got into the university on a full-ride scholarship and got into K&M on an internship into Magic Development. Did you think I was some snobby rich kid this whole time?"

"Yes!" Xena exclaimed.

"Well, that's unfortunate but fortunate at the same time. Rich kids are awarded far better benefits in society than poor kids," Odette grumbled into her wine glass.

"But you like expensive wine?" Xena crossed her arms over the table. Rufus spared her a lick on the side of her face. She ruffled the top of his head without thought.

"No, you assumed I liked expensive wine. I said as long as it tasted good!" Odette pointed with her forefinger as she bit into the wings again.

"Huh, well, I guess that makes me an ass then." Xena flopped back in her seat. Odette smirked up at her from her basket of wings. Xena scoffed, "No, you're still an ass too. Don't try with me, miss I pick a fight over everything."

"Do not," Odette scoffed after swallowing her food.

"You're picking a fight right now." Xena took up her beer bottle and motioned at Odette with it.

"Am no-... now see that's not fair because I can't win that." Odette straightened, drying off her lips again with a napkin. Both of their baskets empty, they lifted off the tables and floated toward the windows. Rufus

watched with pure horror as the baskets danced over his head. He twisted in his seat to watch them fit through the windows.

“That’s another thing, you always have to win.” Xena pushed away from the table so she could kick a leg up and over the other. Sitting back comfortably in the chair, she scanned over Odette in a new light. Xena wasn’t sure she would ever feel completely on the same level as Odette. *Because she too only made it into university on a scholarship.* However, hers was paid in full due to a knight’s contract with K&M. She went through school, agreed to become a knight, and worked in between semesters for most of her youth. Then when her contract was up, she applied to work inside the company instead of as one of its knights.

“I hate this,” Odette grumbled, folding her arms under her chest. “Besides, you changed the subject!”

“Did not.” Xena shook her head.

“Did so! You didn’t tell me one of your horror stories. It’s only fair,” Odette smirked. She sat back in her chair, tucking her ankles to the side of the chair.

Xena pursed her lips. *Horror story? How many did she have?* She had been single for far too long in her mind. However, that didn’t mean she didn’t go out on dates occasionally, back before she became a department head. After that promotion, her social calendar and energy for flings died. “Well, one time I was maybe pushing a little too hard or maybe it was the right amount. But I have also gotten a face full of a girl once. She didn’t tell me she tended to lose control. I mean, I was drenched either way so I just kind of went back to it.” Xena’s shoulders trembled with laughter.

She glanced up to Odette who stifled giggles behind her wine glass. “As someone with experience, I can tell you that your fingers are long and have a tendency to be too rough.” Odette’s gaze fell away as her cheeks tinted hot pink.

“I do not remember you having an issue with my roughness, *Princess*,” Xena purred, her right brow cocked up on her face again.

“I was talking about the many times we’ve gotten into altercations and the state of your sword handle.” Odette fluttered her eyelashes innocently as she locked gazes with Xena again.

“You know damn well you weren’t talking about my sword.” Xena slid her foot under the table, took up the underside of Odette’s chair with her toes, and tugged it closer. Odette yelped as her chair slammed closer to the

table. Her blush covered her cheeks and ran the length of her throat. She put the glass down with trembling hands.

"I wasn't," She swallowed. Xena watched her mouth open to speak a second time, but then her mouth hung open. Her blush died and her eyes stared in horror beyond Xena's shoulders. Xena wrenched around and equally stared in disbelief.

Clara lingered on the sidewalk leading up to Mumford's. Xena climbed to her feet, pushing the chair back in.

"Xena, please, don't." Odette's breathy plea held Xena back for a moment. *Only for a moment though.* As Clara glared at them from down the sidewalk. Then she stormed up the sidewalk toward the two of them. Rufus' low growl told Xena all she needed to know about the situation. Clara was either not in the right mind or was about to lose her mind. Either way, Xena wasn't going to let her ruin her good mood.

Xena stepped away from the table to the edge of the patio. Arms crossed under her chest, she watched patiently as Clara stalked right up to the front of Mumford's. Dressed in shimmering pants tucked under a black jacket, her pointed ears red as the ruby earrings in her ears.

"Excuse you," Clara sneered, brushing to move past Xena at the gate of the patio. When she realized Xena wouldn't move away, she sidestepped and put a leg over the gate. Xena reflexively snatched her up by her twig arm and hoisted her back up and over the fence.

"Private property," Xena snapped.

"Don't. Touch. Me." Clara swatted at Xena's hands childishly. "Odie! I don't want to talk to your ugly friend. I came here to talk to you."

Xena's eyebrows shot up on her face. The sound of a chair scraping across the concrete filled the air. Rufus barked in the background. Xena stepped back into Clara's view.

"I am her ugly friend? What are you, ten? Grow up," Xena growled.

"That's rich coming from you!" Clara tossed her arms in the air. "You know what, I remember what my fiancé used to say about you all the time. So childish, so ill-tempered, so messy. How could Xena do something so *stupid*! Yeah, I know about you."

"You called me ill-tempered?" Xena whirled back toward Odette with a wide smirk.

"To be fair, you did break a punching bag once to prove a point." Odette stepped up beside her.

“That is fair. But you’ve got the bigger temper. I mean, your hands literally catch fire!” Xena motioned at Odette’s hands. Odette wagged a finger in her face but said nothing in return. Instead, she stepped around Xena so her back was pressed against her torso. She settled in the few inches between Xena and Clara.

“Clara, what do you want?” Odette snapped her fingers. Rufus appeared at her side, sat down beside her, and nose pointed up at Clara with teeth bared.

“Rufus, what the fuck, you’re supposed to be on my side?” Clara whined as she lurched backward. Rufus clicked his teeth at her in response.

“I don’t think he likes you. Probably something to do with your personality.” Xena put a hand on top of Rufus. Odette shot a warning over her shoulder at her. Xena ruffled Rufus’s head tenderly. He bristled at Clara but leaned into the scratches behind his ears.

“Can we talk? You won’t take my calls and you’ve been avoiding me.” Clara hugged herself with a large pout on her lips.

“I can only imagine what you have to say, which is precisely why I have avoided your calls.” Odette stiffened against Xena. “I’m not your fiancé, stop telling people that. We’re not together.”

“I thought we got over that.” Clara tossed out her arms.

“Got over what? The fact that everything is about you? I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you came here to apologize and not to manipulate me into taking you back.”

Clara froze, her hands floating down to her sides. Then she picked at her jacket with her eyes wider and poutier than they had been before. “I’m sorry, Odie. I know I can be a lot and demanding. But I just love you so much. I want us to be together. I’m back at my parents now and I’m better now. I promise. Please.”

“That’s not an apology and you’re not better. If you loved me, you wouldn’t have left me in the first place. I’m sorry you’re forced to live with your parents. I know you resent them and want your independence. But that is no longer my problem. You are no longer my problem. Please leave.” Odette slipped from in front of Xena and stepped back toward the table. Rufus trotted after her.

“Wait! Odie.”

“I believe she asked you to leave.” Xena brushed the air in Clara’s direction with a smug smirk plastered to her lips.

“Step aside before I make you.” Clara stepped up closer to Xena.

Xena cracked her knuckles in front of her. Laughing, she wiggled her brows at Clara, “I’d love to see you try.”

“Xena!” Odette barked. “Go settle our tab, and then you’re taking me and Rufus home. Wash your hands while you’re in there.”

Xena grinned from ear to ear as Clara’s face drained of color. Xena stepped over the gate and toward the front door. She glanced over her shoulder at the Fae woman. Clara’s attention darted between her and Odette. She scrambled toward Odette. Xena knew she didn’t need to step in. Instead, she slid inside the building and headed toward the bar. Minx took her card from her outstretched hand and swiped it. He eyed her but said nothing as she walked to the bathroom to do as she was told. When Xena sauntered back out of the restaurant, Odette stood out by her truck. She parked in the parallel parking across the street. Rufus sat next to her, tongue out, and happy as can be. Clara was nowhere to be seen.

“So, shall we?” Xena nodded to her vehicle as she unlocked it from her pocket.



“We shall, but I don’t want to go home.” Odette ruffled Rufus’ hair. “We can stop by to drop him off but, I kind of need to work off pent-up frustration.”

Xena hesitated by her door. Then she opened the cab up and motioned for them to climb in. Rufus bound inside the massive cabin. Odette took hold of the handle on the side of the truck. She barely hoisted herself up when a hand scooped up her backside and placed her into the truck. Xena’s hand squeezed warmly before planting her on the seat. Odette peered down at her, heart racing in her chest.

“What kind of workout?” Xena stepped up, hovering in the frame. Her face closed the space between them, her breath warming Odette’s frosty cheeks. Xena balanced one foot on the step of her truck, the other firmly in the cabin.

Odette’s fingers found their way into the fur of Xena’s jacket. The synthetic fibers tickled her burning palms. That’s when her attention fell

to the silk top that draped over Xena. In the cool night, it had been a pop of color under the jacket. Yet, here, with Xena's jacket open, her torso was exposed to Odette. She brushed her palm against the fabric before her gaze returned to meet the burning amber that bore into her.

"The kind that leaves me pinned up against something with your long fingers being very rough." Odette shivered as Xena captured her lips. Odette melted into her kiss. Tugging at her lips with her teeth, she moaned as Xena pushed through into the truck. She pushed Odette across the cabin seat and yanked the door behind her in one swoop of her long limbs. Xena settled into her driver's seat and cranked the vehicle on. Rufus bounced in his seat.

As Xena pulled out onto the street, the heater filled the cabin with warmth. Xena rested her hand on Odette's thigh. Her fingers traced the knitting of Odette's dress before brushing it up onto her lap. Odette slid closer, her thighs parting. Xena's throat rumbled with a noise that shook her down to the bone. She buried her fingers under the tops of Odette's stockings and squeezed her thighs.

"Mercy on me, you in stockings will be my demise." Xena gripped the wheel hard with her other hand. Her gaze stayed glued to the road, but her attention was on Odette. Her fingers dug tenderly into Odette's thighs before steadily tracing her way under her dress. The fabric pushed up near her hips, exposing her sex to the bite of the cold seat beneath her. *It didn't stay cold for long.* Xena's fingers traced her slit teasingly before going back to her thighs.

Odette warmed dangerously fast as she tried not to turn into a puddle. Rufus watched out the passenger window, happy to just be included. She hadn't thought about what she would do with Rufus when they got wherever they were going. But he would have to be inside or secluded somewhere. If he even caught a whiff of Odette trying to fight or fly off somewhere, he would run after her.

"Where can we keep Rufus?" Odette swallowed.

Xena grinned. "Oh, so we're fully playing then," Xena slapped the inside of Odette's thigh. Odette jumped at the sharp pain. Then throbbing pleasure replaced the sting as warmth radiated up her body into her stomach. "He can stay in my extra barn with Peaches, they'll get along well and there's no hay to catch fire in there."

“I mean, if that’s what you want.” Odette flushed harder. She fought to keep control of her vocal cords and traitorous, trembling hands.

Xena ran her palm down the length of Odette’s thigh, scooped her leg up from behind the knee, and wrenched Odette even closer. Then tossing her arm behind Odette’s head, Xena rested her palm against Odette’s arm. She traced the knitted pattern on her dress sleeves. “*Princess*, you tell me what we’re doing tonight.”

Odette stared out the windshield for a long moment. Xena hadn’t assumed anything. She let Odette choose the adventure and setting. Weightless and breathless, Odette leaned into the warmth of Xena’s torso. The silk halter top felt like butter against Odette’s cheek. She smelt like fresh hay and musky deodorant, but it wasn’t strong. Odette made the unconscious choice to wear light deodorant and perfume since they joined offices and she knew Xena was sensitive to scent. She’d never felt so keenly aware of someone else’s scent until now.

“I want you to chase me,” Odette exhaled, “I want to feel that again, but I don’t want to be scared or angry. I want it to be fun. I want to have fun.” The words tumbled out of her mouth and floated into the air around them.

“What would scare you, in this instance?” Xena cupped Odette’s bicep and squeezed.

“Screaming at me. Berating me. Calling me names other than mine and princess.” Odette glanced up into Xena’s face. There was no confusion or alarm, only interest. A calm smile lifted her lips up at the edges.

“So, no fear of the dark or running through the woods or being chased. Just fear of me being a massive bitch. Got it,” Xena chuckled. “Ground rules, the woods around my property feel endless, but there is a fence. You may run wherever you want, and I know you have dark vision so I’m not afraid of you taking out your ankles or knees on fallen over trees or stumps. But if you come to the fence, it’s got Battlemoar burned into the wood every four feet, you stay inside the fence. I can only ensure your safety inside the fence. All the animals are already put up and locked away so the only thing hunting you will be me. If it’s too much, you say stop. If you’re done, you say stop. And no magic.”

“Whoa! Why no magic?” Odette straightened up beside Xena.

“Because it’s unfair and you know it. Since I know you have a lot of siblings, I know you know how to scramble and scuffle, so I expect to

wrestle you to the ground before I claim you and pin you.” Xena slid her hand up Odette’s arm till her palm rested on her exposed collar bone. She brushed her fingers over Odette’s skin, sending shivers down Odette’s spine. Then she brushed her fingers down the front of her dress. She traced designs along the tops of Odette’s breasts before running her fingers back up Odette’s throat again.

Odette couldn’t express how much she enjoyed the idea of Xena’s words. The truck had already taken them far out of King’s Fall. It wasn’t till they turned down a gravel road that the impact of their newest activity weighed on her. Her insides twisted up with excitement. Xena rolled down her windows a crack. Rufus immediately jammed his full snout out the three-inch crack and inhaled sharply.

“Rufus, buddy, calm down. You’re going to have plenty to sniff in a minute.” Xena tapped her fingers against Odette’s throat in steady, light taps. Odette’s heart rate increased three times the speed and thundered in her ears. The roar of her own excitement covered the sound of the engine as they turned into the open archway of a farm. Hay and slumbering animals filled the air with a fresh but earthy scent. Gravel crunched under the tires. Odette scanned the horizon. Two large buildings plus about three smaller ones, the snores of things inside like a symphony as the engine cut off.

“Now, don’t go bolting. Let’s get Rufus settled and then I’ll show you where you can play,” Xena purred in Odette’s ears.

Odette opened her lips to retort or scoff at Xena’s command. But Xena captured her in a kiss without warning. Xena scooped up her chin with the one hand that had been on her throat and pulled her in close. Odette nearly toppled over her own limbs into Xena’s lap to keep up. Her hands fumbled around Xena’s waist before finding her fingers digging into the edge of her jeans. Odette clambered in between Xena and the steering wheel. Xena moved her hands to hold Odette firmly. She squeezed both Odette’s cheeks enthusiastically. Then Odette reached for the door and popped it open. Xena gasped against her lips as Odette floated out of the truck and down to the gravel beside the truck. Xena grunted hard as Rufus used her as a launching pad out of the truck.

“Those are dirty tricks.” Xena flung herself out of the truck with a growl.

Odette sauntered away from the vehicle toward the grassy fields and barns. “You didn’t say I couldn’t fight dirty.” Odette tossed over her shoulder.

Odette swallowed a squeal as Xena scooped her up in one arm. Kicking the door shut behind her, Xena whistled lowly for Rufus to follow. Odette motioned at her confused hellhound to follow her. Xena tossed Odette over her wide shoulders. From her new vantage point, Odette could see the vast acres of land. Trees lined most of the property, surrounding the large fenced-in fields with thick green and leaves. The barns were tall and sturdy with wooden posts and iron accents. Odette was placed down on her feet outside a smaller barn that sat closer to the house.

“When we have new were-ravens or other birds, he gets his own place but he’s usually a pretty chill boy. Rufus, what do you think?” Xena nodded at the spacious birdhouse. A massive black bird hunched on a rung above the empty interior, snoring by clacking his teeth softly. Rufus sat outside the barn, eyeballing the bird. Yet his curiosity got the better of him and he stared up at Odette for permission.

“Go on, you stay here for a bit, okay?” Odette snapped her fingers and his water bowl and food bowl appeared in the barn. Rufus trotted inside and put his whole face in his bowl. Xena closed it behind him. Odette pressed a hand onto the door, pulling chalk out of thin air and drawing on the wood until it glowed lilac under her palm. “Just in case.”

Xena put out a hand. At first, Odette offered her the chalk before they both stared at each other in confusion. Then Odette dropped the chalk and put her palm in Xena’s hands. The tight feeling in her belly returned with a vengeance. She swallowed over her dry tongue. Xena led her across the gravel, past two of the fields toward the back of the farm. A vast forest expanded before her. Trees covered in thick oak leaves in a multitude of colors, obviously kept forever thriving by the sheer magic that pulsed out of the earth. Odette wondered for a moment if Xena knew her family made a were-rescue on a natural pocket of earth magic. Or maybe the forest produced it on its own long after they were here. Either way, a breath of fresh air danced around her and whispered in her ear. Whispers for her to run, to break free and explore, encouraging her to breathe in the wonder.

Xena stepped back and zipped up her jacket. “Do you want to change?”

“Are you kidding?” Odette scoffed. “Just don’t rip it with your rough fingers.” Odette twisted to put her back to the trees and walk backward

toward them. Xena stared down at her, poking her hands in her pockets. “Do I get a head start?”

“*Princess*, move your ass.” Xena cocked her right brow up and Odette bolted.

Arms at her side, she broke across the ground at the top speed. Her lungs already burned from the chilly air and fresh mist falling over her head. Rustling through branches and trees, she bound over logs and bushes. Her boots had grip and thankfully were flat on the bottom. They were meant for walking for long periods of time. Thighs hot from the effort, she pumped her legs. It didn’t take long for her heart to race. The feeling of being watched filled her with giddy excitement. Something inside her told her to turn left. She swung around trees and nearly avoided a Xena-sized tackling to the ground. A low growl rumbled off the bark around her. Odette dodged tree branches and bushes by weaving in and out of trees.

“You’ve got a good sense of direction, *Princess*, but you’re only delaying the inevitable.” Xena’s purr tripped Odette up and she stumbled through a patch of vines and thorns. She broke the magic rule for only a moment to free herself of stabbing flora. She used a branch to leverage herself around a tree and flee in a new direction. Xena’s footsteps sounded thunderous behind her.

Odette couldn’t help the smile and squeal as she dove around a boulder. She pressed a hand to her own mouth as Xena charged past her and down further into the trees. Odette’s heart pounded in her throat. Her thighs squeezed together as she tried to fill her air with lungs.

“Not a good hiding spot, *Princess*.”

Odette bound out from the boulder seconds before Xena launched from the branches she’d climbed. Odette hadn’t even thought to look up or listen for her in the tree branches. Wind already rustled the leaves enough to make Xena completely silent. Odette scrambled back into motion, dancing out of reach for the moment.

Then two arms snatched her up by the middle section and wrenched her off her feet. Odette shrieked. Kicking her legs up and dropping her weight, she slipped out of Xena’s grasp. She tried to crawl away. Xena’s hands found purchase around her ankles and dragged her across the leaves. Odette resisted her urge to blast Xena’s face full of air or create a spark for

a diversion. *No magic*. She promised no magic. Excitement thrummed through her and made her legs tremble.

Odette pivoted and dug her toes into the earth, clawing up and out of Xena's grip. She jolted through the trees.

"You're slippery, *Princess*, but you're starting to give in. I felt that hesitation. Your legs shake at my touch. I wonder what will happen if I catch you again? Will you fight me?" Xena's words bounced off the trees as Odette rounded another oak.

She reached up into the branches. Her fingers shook as the adrenaline began to work against her. She barely pulled herself up off the ground when hands snatched her. Odette gasped for air. Xena pinned her against the tree. Her kiss was ferocious and consuming. Odette moaned against her mouth. She tried to reach for the branches. Xena growled and yanked her hands down in between them. Xena's hands ghosted over Odette's hardening nipples. The whimper echoed in their kiss. Xena's attention shifted. Odette's frozen fingertips wove into Xena's hair and tugged on her golden tendrils.

Xena pressed into her, traveling over Odette's body while keeping her pinned to the tree. Tugging her dress up, her palm cupped Odette's sex over her panties. Xena's fingers snatched up the fabric and tugged them down her body. Odette focused on putting her hands up onto the branches with Xena's focus now far away from her escaping prey.

Xena pulled away enough to remove the fabric between Odette's legs. Just as they passed Odette's knees, she hoisted herself up into the tree. Xena stood, gawking in awe and surprise with panties in her hands. Odette stuck her tongue out to Xena below her.

"Smart, distracting me, but that only works *once*," Xena purred as she reached up to the branch. Tucking the underwear into her pockets, she put both hands on the branch. Odette leaped from one to another and crawled from one tree to another.

Odette tried to hold in her nervous giggles and wavering breath as Xena stormed after her beneath the tree branches. She couldn't hold it in as Xena took hold of a branch and flung herself up into the treetops. Hugging a tree, she slid down to the ground. But it took more time than she wanted. Xena grappled her to the patches of grass around the tree trunk.

"You're mine now." Xena pinned Odette's wrists to the earth.

Odette panted for air. Xena's amber gaze was illuminated by the moonlight that cracked through the leaves over them. The canopy of oak leaves left a pattern of moonlight and shadows all over them. Xena hovered over her, pressing her knees between Odette's legs. Odette melted back against the earth and Xena cocked her right brow up in challenge. This was her chance to try and break free again. But Odette didn't want to run anymore. Breathless and with a smile on her face, she slid her boots up the backside of Xena's jeans and thighs.

"I'm yours now," Odette answered.

Xena devoured her whole.

This kiss wasn't demanding or dominating like the others, but it stole what little air she had. Xena let go of her wrists so she could cup the outside of Odette's cheeks. She lifted Odette's head off the earth and slid a palm under it. Her free hand slid between them toward her slit. Odette sighed happily into the kiss. Xena's pointer finger slid between her wet folds to circle her already sensitive clit. Circling it, she didn't have to do much. Odette squirmed against her. Her hips rotated against Xena's consistent pressure. Xena allowed Odette to find the angle and touch while Xena worked her up into a frenzy. Odette cried out into Xena's mouth as she bucked into Xena's hand.

The orgasm that followed filled Odette's vision with stars. She blinked away the sparks in her vision as her insides fluttered. Xena trailed kisses down Odette's jawline to her throat. She bit down into Odette's flesh. Odette found herself flinching less at the pain, or maybe Xena was gentler this time. But her kisses covered her collar bone and throat till Xena had kissed every inch of her exposed flesh.

"I'd ask you to do the same, but I don't think you washed your hands," Xena snickered.

"Yeah, spicy wings is far more aggressive than tree bark and leaves. But," Odette put a palm against Xena's chest to lift her off of Odette's ribs. Xena hovered over her, moving to put both palms against the earth beside Odette's head. Odette squirmed her way to having her legs around Xena's hips. Then with a burst of air and a slap of her hands behind her, she flipped them and straddled Xena. "If you'll allow me to break the no magic rule. I might have a friend or two in my pockets."

Xena tossed her head back, her full belly laugh filling Odette to the brim with glee. It pooled in her lower torso. Odette liked the way Xena

didn't hold back when she truly laughed. How she held her stomach and tossed her golden hair back. Odette snapped her fingers. Then slapped a dildo against Xena's chest. "Hold this."

"Whoa, you weren't kidding," Xena gasped, scrambling up onto her elbows so she could hold the fake member in hand. "Do you always have one or just thought you might need it tonight?"

Odette smirked as she squirmed down Xena's lap. Her fingers nimbly undid Xena's jeans and slid them down Xena's hips. "I plead not to incriminate myself."

Xena lifted her own hips to allow Odette to press her bare cheeks against the frosty ground. Not that she had time to feel it long. Odette covered her exposed hip muscles and pelvis bone in wet kisses. Tossing her head back once more, Xena exhaled a shaky breath. Odette nipped tenderly at the crook between her thighs and hip, finding the spot between the muscle groups. Xena bucked her hips with a low moan. Odette wanted more than that. She'd made more noise than that.

Odette kissed Xena's slit. When Xena didn't cry out more, Odette bit down on her inner thigh. Xena yelped, nearly beating herself in the face with the dildo. Odette snickered as she nuzzled her face against Xena's toned legs. They stiffened, trapped by the jeans Odette didn't fully take off.

"You will regret that cheeky bite later," Xena warned with a deep growl. "And I remember last time you didn't need the friend to get me off."

"I know, but this one is special, this one has never been used *and* has a fun feature." Odette snatched it out of Xena's grip. Xena propped herself up again on her elbows to watch Odette. Her tongue flat against Xena's sex, she swiped up then back down with the tip of her tongue.

Xena swallowed, her lips cracking open. Odette slid her tongue further and further in until it circled Xena's clit. Xena moaned a throaty moan that rumbled through Odette. Her skin prickled with goosebumps. Then she pulled back for only a moment to slither the regular smooth, bullet-shaped device between Xena's lips.

"Are you anti-toy, before I use this on you?" Odette hesitated, crouched between Xena's legs.

"Absolutely not, it just can't be too high or sharp." Xena rutted against the device. Odette slid it deep within Xena. Xena lay her head back as

Odette filled her. Returning her tongue to Xena's clit, she found the rhythm Xena enjoyed quickly. Xena lowered herself back down against the ground. One of her hands found Odette's ponytail and wrapped it around her fist, the other clawed deep into earth beside her. She tugged and then released her hair in tandem with Odette's tongue and toy. Then Odette pressed the tiny button on the back of the dildo.

It hummed a low rumble that radiated through Xena's core.

"Oh, that's what you meant," Xena confessed in a single breath. The toy started a slow, dull rumble that built up and pulsed out like a wave within her body.

The sharpness of a regular vibration would be too much. Odette knew better from the first time they'd slept together that Xena's skin and nerves were sensitive. She felt every bite and kiss and lick. She needed something that was low, slow, a pulse that would keep her from being overwhelmed. Odette surged with pride at her excellent work. Had she bought it the night Xena asked her to dinner? Yes!

Had she ever once considered three or more weeks ago that she would not only go out to buy a toy to use on Xena Battlemoar, but then be in between her legs in the middle of a forest? Absolutely not.

But Odette knew better than to expect anything anymore. Instead, she allowed herself to enjoy the moment. No thoughts of work or what might happen in the morning. No toxic ex's or demanding bosses, no sales quota's, or policies. Just Xena whimpering Odette's name as she rode out her orgasm on Odette's tongue.

Odette quickly turned off the device and allowed Xena to gently fall back down from her high. Then, when she was sure Xena was ready, she slipped the device back out and out of sight. It popped into the pocket dimension, ready to be cleaned when she returned to reality.

Xena and she awkwardly shuffled to their feet and picked leaves out of their hair and clothing. Xena worked her pants and underpants back up. Odette straightened her dress and grinned to herself that it was no worse for wear. Then she turned to Xena and put her hand out. Xena eyed her palm, then smirked and shook her head. Odette huffed and put her hands to her hips.

"They're my underwear, you can't expect me to walk all the way back without them."

“I don’t expect you to walk.” Xena snatched Odette off the ground without a second thought. “And I earned these panties, and they will stay in my pocket.”

“Now you’re just being absurd. Xena, give me my underwear this instance.” Odette smacked the back of Xena’s leather jacket.

“I don’t think I will.” Xena threw her head back and laughed as Odette squirmed. She walked back toward the farm. However, Odette quit her squirming the second Xena spanked her exposed cheeks. Odette’s insides jolted and her nerves ignited. Xena patted her bare cheeks, then the front of her already wet sex. “See, this right here is why you’re not getting them back till morning.”

“Xena!” Odette slapped the back of her broad shoulders more. She kicked with her legs, but Xena only spanked her again. Odette jerked in response, unable to hold in the gasp for air. Xena ran the outside of her knuckle down her exposed slit. Odette buried her face into the collar of fur. Every muscle in her legs tightened.

“I don’t remember hearing you use the stop word.” Xena nursed Odette’s already abused clit.

“I didn’t,” Odette murmured into the back of Xena’s throat as she weakly struggled to push off Xena. As she started a steady rhythm, Odette gave in. Her hands and legs trembled as a low tension built in her insides. Odette’s breath came out in puffs from the cold, nighttime air. Xena didn’t stop. Odette didn’t ask her to stop. In fact, Xena continued her steady, slow torment up till they reached the farm. Where she leaned Odette against the last tree before they cleared the forest. She tenderly slipped her clean fingers inside her. Odette held onto Xena’s shoulders for strength as Xena built her up to a slower, more drawn-out orgasm.

Every muscle in her body gave out around Xena. Odette’s cheeks hurt from the chill, but her insides burned from the blush that covered her entire body.

“Now that I’ve knocked the attitude out of you, we can both sleep soundly tonight.” Xena lowered Odette to her feet. Still no panties, but at least the walk wasn’t far.

Odette flopped back against the bark of the tree. Her fingers stiffened around Xena’s jacket, unable to unfurl them. She lazily gazed up at Xena. “Are you asking me to stay the night?”

“Are you coherent enough to make it home?” Xena teased with a kiss on her sweaty forehead.

“No, plus I can’t teleport with Rufus, he’s too wiggly.” She shivered, her body falling off the high or an orgasm and chase.

Xena plucked her off the tree and acted as a crutch for Odette’s jelly legs as they walked toward the large house. She said nothing as Odette collected Rufus from his slumber inside the smaller barn. Rufus sleepily trailed after her, barely coherent himself. Then Xena led her through a dark rustic home that she could barely focus on. She remembered switching out her dress for a t-shirt out of Xena’s dresser and fighting to remove her boots. However, she didn’t remember falling asleep. Only flopping back against a massive bed and thinking about how comfy and large it was. Then she thought about how warm Xena’s back and Rufus curled up at her belly felt. She slipped away somewhere between bliss and confusion at how suddenly she’d become accustomed to the sound of Xena’s breathing.

Chapter Twelve:

Xena awoke to the screech of chickens, the harsh sunlight breaking through her bedroom window, and one pair of Fae feet and four paws digging into her backside. Xena arched away from the feet only to jolt awake as frozen toes and scratchy paw pads dug into her exposed thighs. Flipping out of the bed and onto her feet made her legs wobble. Xena stared at her bed. Rufus had somehow sleep scurried in between the two at some point and stretched out. Odette, however, was curled up into a tight ball with her toes where Xena's lower back used to be.

When she offered to let Odette sleepover, she didn't think tiny Odette and the hellhound would take over her bed. She had the Ultimate king-sized bed which was one hundred by one hundred inches. It took up most of the master room. Xena bought it because it completely let her stretch out. Now she wondered if it was big enough. *Did they make anything bigger?*

"Shut up you miniature terrorists." Dinah's gruff voice bounced off the outside of the house. Xena rubbed her face with her palms. Stepping up to her window, she stared down at her father outside. He wobbled sleepily in the early morning light across the gravel to the barns to let the animals out. Xena cursed under her breath. Usually, she let everyone out and Dinah locked them up. Their routine benefited them both as Xena always woke up before the sun and Dinah went to bed around sunset.

Xena worked to pull on sweatpants and a long sleeve shirt. Breaking the seal on the perfect temperature within the room, a breath of air swept in. As the morning crept through the doorway, Odette curled up more under the blanket. Rufus raised his head, tongue lazily flopping out of his mouth. Xena stared at him. He blinked away. She put one hand on her hip and jutted her thumb toward the door. Rufus yawned large enough to show the internal flames dancing around his tonsils. Xena scowled and tapped her toes against the ground.

"What would she teach you to get you up? Uh, Rufus, walk?" Xena whispered.

Rufus launched off the bed and lazily trotted after her. Xena poked him in the butt with her foot, finding the fires licked in between her toes. She

closed the door behind her. The beast tiptoed down the stairs. Rufus and Xena stepped out into the main room of the farmhouse. A two-story home with two sides that Dinah and Xena worked to expand themselves with the help of friends and family back in Dinah's younger years. A fresh newlywed promise became a family commitment that only continued to grow. The main floor was an open layout around the main pillar of the house. The living room was to the left with the main front door and the kitchen was on the right with the back door and porch. On the eastern side were her father's stairs and loft master bedroom. On the western side was Xena's loft-style master bedroom. The pantry was tucked under Xena's side and the laundry under Dinah's.

Xena popped open the back door and let Rufus trot across the back porch. His whole snout to the wooden floor, he sniffed hard and followed a scent. A scent that led them both to Dinah, fighting with Peaches and the cocky roosters. Dinah kicked at the chickens, knowing that chickens only respect feet. The roosters reared up to charge when Peaches would launch in and barrel the rooster over. The kerfuffle broke up as the massive hellhound tracked a scent across the yard. Dinah froze in his muck boots and hands full of cracked corn. His mouth hung open. Then he whirled around to his daughter scratching at the back of her neck.

"You brought home a hellhound?" Dinah coughed up his surprise and half his lung.

"He's one hell of a good boy." Xena shrugged then snatched the corn out of his hands. "Sorry, had a late night."

"Is that what all that howling in the woods was about? I thought some were-foxes got stuck in the rose bushes or something." Dinah's face broke into the biggest, shit-eating grin Xena had ever seen him wear. She punched him in the right bicep. He snatched the corn right back out of her hand. "It's all good, been a while since you dared bring someone home."

"Well, not a lot of people are fearless in the eyes of a were-rescue." Xena snatched the bag back and curled it up in her hands. She dunked it into the massive tin can against the fence. Tossing the lid onto the tin can, she spared a ruffle to Jeremy who loomed at the edge of his pen. All his attention and focus, even as an old werewolf, were glued to Rufus. His hackles rose on his back, curling upward in the middle much like a cat. His teeth bared as Rufus rounded the fence and headed his way. "Uh, Dad, can you grab Rufus?"

“Grab him? You kidding me? The dogs on fire.”

“He’s charmed, the collar’s enchanted.” Xena rolled her eyes.

“You brought a witch and her demon dog to the farm? Full of werewolves and were-bears?” Dinah snatched up Rufus by the collar. Rufus stopped. His face pinched in confusion as he fought against Dinah’s grip. Dinah stared down at the dog who tried to continue his sniffing journey. Dinah tossed an arm around him and hoisted him off the ground. Rufus froze, all legs sticking out and flames hissing, steam rising off his hair. “I’ll be damned, the witch is good at her job.”

“I don’t think Rufus appreciates being manhandled, you old man. Put him down. He knows commands.” Xena twisted toward Jeremy. “Unlike someone who will remain nameless.”

“Let them fight, see who puts who in their place. Bet you Jeremy takes one toe toward your hound here and realizes this shifts on fire and backs up.” Dinah set Rufus back on his paws. Rufus reared up and bounced about the gravel, all his hair blazing over him. He stomped and jumped at Dinah but kept his teeth away and never landed a blow. Dinah scoffed, crossing his arms. Rufus huffed and snorted but did nothing but throw a fit. “He’s scarily human.”

“You should see him sat at the table,” Xena cackled.

“He sits at the table? What kind of witch did you bone?” Dinah blurted out.

“She’s not a witch!” Xena kicked her father in the shin.

Dinah swung and caught his daughter square in the chest. She grunted from the blow and fell back into the fence. Then he kicked her shin for good measure. “She taught a hellhound table manners, she’s a witch.”

Xena snorted as she hopped on one foot and rubbed her shin. “Damn old man, you are wearing steel-toed boots this early?” She wheezed.

“Now I know I taught you to tolerate a smack and a tap of my boot. Stop being a baby and suck it up.” He patted her on the arm.

Xena glanced back at Jeremy. He stuck his whole wolfy head out the wooden fence. Rufus stood still, ears up and eyes focused on Jeremy. Lurking forward, Jeremy brought himself closer to Rufus one limb at a time. Rufus held still, waiting for Jeremy to initiate something. Then Jeremy pounced down at the fence. Rufus whipped into position, his tail and butt wiggling in the air and nose to the fence. Jeremy bolted down the fence. Rufus charged after him.

“Hey, what do you know, they like each other.” Xena jabbed her thumb after the two racing up and down the fence line with their tongues flapping in the wind.

“Make sure he doesn’t ignite the fence. West has a sprained ankle and so it’s just me for the week.” Dinah pulled open other tin cans full of dry food for the animals along the farm. He handed Xena a bowl full of chow for Snuggles, the were-bear. He put Peaches’ bird food into the massive bird feeder on one of the many posts throughout the farm.

“Don’t worry, he didn’t ignite my bed so he’s probably safe running the fence line. Probably should avoid the dead leaves though.” Xena opened Snuggles’ barn into the yard. The were-bear flopped out of the barn into the yard and lay in the warm morning sun. Xena poured the food into the food trough and locked the door open for Snuggles.

“Mm, so she’s still upstairs then, huh?” Dinah tossed a rock at Xena.

She blocked it and chucked an even bigger rock at her father. They blocked and tossed rocks from across the yard until all the animals had fresh dry food and pulled hay. Rufus and Jeremy finally lost energy and flopped out on the ground next to each other along the fence. Dinah and Xena closed all the tins and locked up the supplies while dodging chickens under their feet.

Dinah dusted his hands off on his pants. “So, you’re telling me you brought home a lazy, sleepy witch with a hellhound.”

“It was a long night.” Xena punched her father hard in the bicep. “And what is this about West spraining his ankle? You break the kid already?”

He chuckled, rubbing his arm. “He found a pothole. Turns out we have were-armadillos.”

Xena groaned, “We do *not* have were-armadillos. I just forgot to fill in the holes from the yard. You’re starting to lose your mind, old man.”

“Am I? Or are there ravenous mutant armadillos digging holes in my yard?” Dinah walked back toward the house.

Xena glanced at Rufus who sprang to his feet. Panting, he followed her back inside the house. She took out a bowl from the cabinet and filled it full of water. She set it down for Rufus. He stared at it with mild disgust and confusion. “Oh, come on, don’t be such a prissy prima-ballerina. You’re hot, it’s water, drink it.”

Rufus glanced up at her. Then he stared at the stairs. As if he weighed the options before he put his nose to the water. He sniffed it. Then he

poked his tongue into the water. He stared up at Xena leaning back against the kitchen counter before slowly lapping it up.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought punk.” Xena marched to the fridge and opened it. Her stomach roared, demanding sacrifice immediately. She pulled out the grilled steaks wrapped up in the fridge and slapped one into the iron skillet. Frying it back up to warm before tossing eggs into the skillet, she caught Rufus nosing the fridge open.

“Whoa, buddy.” Dinah shut the door before Rufus could fully stick his head inside. “You are way too smart for your own good.”

“That’s what I thought. Apparently, he can fetch water out of the fridge.” Xena slid her scrambled eggs over her steak.

“What’s he eat? Roosters? I’ve got a few I could sacrifice.” Dinah eyed Rufus.

The creak of a door opening caused all three to freeze. Rufus sat down and stared at the stairs. Xena froze by the stove with Dinah stuck mid-sip of his coffee. Pale, short legs were all Xena could see first as Odette climbed down the steps. Xena’s shirt devoured Odette’s torso like a tent over her body, the gym shorts barely visible under the edge of the fabric. Odette rubbed her hands at her face as she toed her way down the stairs.

Stood on the bottom step, Odette cracked her eyes open. Three sets of eyes stared back. Odette’s attention bounced between all of them. Then she snapped her fingers and patted the side of her thigh. Rufus bolted across the floor and scrambled to her side. He sat by her feet, staring up at her.

“See, only a witch can command hellhounds,” Dinah hissed under his breath from behind his coffee mug.

“Shut. Up.” Xena swat at her father’s form. “Morning, how did you sleep?”

“Like the dead, actually. Um, Hi, I’m Odette Plum.” Odette waved shortly to Dinah.

“*The* Odette Plum?” Dinah set his mug down on the countertop. He turned toward Xena who blushed for the first time in ages. Ducking her head, she moved about finding bread to toast or coffee to pour. Literally, anything to avoid her father’s incredulous gaze. It never stopped as his eyes followed her around the kitchen.

“She complains about me as much as I complain about her, I see?” Odette sheepishly scratched at the back of her neck.

“It’s an endless tirade with this one. Didn’t beat her enough as a child.” Dinah kicked at the back of Xena’s legs. Her knees bent from the force, and she clutched the countertops. Dinah smiled from ear to ear and motioned for Odette to join them. “Mighty impressive hound you got,” Dinah chuckled.

“Thanks. His names Rufus, he’s my baby.” Odette knelt to snuggle her face into Rufus’. She ruffled his flaming fur and cooed words at him as he panted toward her.

“He sure is.” Dinah spun back toward Xena. Xena tossed her arms out to her side, rambling silently as her father intensely stared. His eyes bore through her with disbelief.

“What?” Xena mouthed.

“Her? That’s her?” Dinah jabbed his thumb at Odette with raised brows.

“What!” Xena scowled.

“Is everything okay?”

Both Dinah and Xena spun to smile at Odette as she pulled a chair out at the table. In unison, they chirped, “Fantastic.”

She snapped and pointed to the seat. “Take a seat, Rufus.” The dog lept into the seat and beamed up at the other two. Dinah stared at the dog with a slack jaw. Then Odette made his bowls appear before him. She put a frisbee under both his food and water. Xena set her own plate on the table. Odette allowed Rufus to start eating as she moved toward the kitchen sink. Dinah watched Rufus calmly pick through his kibble and eat like he had table manners. Odette washed her hands before moving to the stove.

“Did you want me to make you steak and eggs?” Xena sputtered to life.

“I can manage some eggs on my own. Eat your food before it goes cold.” Odette kept her focus on the skillet and frying up her own eggs.

Xena hesitated at first to dig into her food. Her attention was torn between watching Odette move about her kitchen and her father fascinated by both the Hellhound and Xena’s ‘witch’. He settled at the table, barely able to chew his whole grain muffin. Then he popped some into his mouth and washed it down with his coffee. Odette joined them at the table with eggs, a banana out of the fruit basket on the counter, a tiny cup of juice, and buttered toast. Odette scooped some of her eggs into Rufus’ bowl before digging into her own food.

“I have to ask.” Dinah broke the silent bubble around them first. “What are the frisbee’s for?”

“They’re the only plates he can eat out of,” Xena blurted out.

Odette caught Xena’s wide eyes and smiled. Xena stuffed a chunk of steak that forced her to chew loudly into her mouth. It might have felt awkward to have Odette there, eating breakfast with her father... *it should have felt awkward*. But Odette cleared the air by directing the attention back to Dinah. “You run a were-rescue, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Pretty proud of how far it’s come. It’s a little rickety in some spots but that’s just because Xena’s not as limber as she used to be.” Dinah slapped Xena on the back. She choked on her own food. She slugged him in the chest. Dinah nearly inhaled his coffee through his nose. He waved his fist at Xena who faked a lunge at him.

“Well, it’s good to know you treat *everyone* like they’re in your fraternity football team.” Odette rolled her eyes as she tossed a chunk of banana into her mouth.

“Just the old man, you have to beat him up a little, or else he thinks he can mouth off to everyone.” Xena jabbed a thumb in Dinah’s direction. She dried her mouth off with the cloth napkins at the table. The coffee tasted sweeter this morning than it ever had. As she sipped it, she almost didn’t put it down until it was gone. When she did set the mug down, Rufus had finished his meal and waited patiently at the table.

Odette tugged his chair back and let him down. He scampered off the chair and toward the back door. Odette hesitated to get up. Dinah beat her to it, shuffling to the door and cracking the screen open with a chunk of wood. She watched after him with concern.

“Don’t worry, he already made friends with Jeremy.” Xena cleaned off her plate with one last scoop of eggs into her mouth.

“The werewolf!” Odette barked.

“Yeah, they ran laps earlier.” Dinah sat back in his chair stiffly. Odette’s concerned expression darted back and forth between Xena and Dinah. Then she sat back in her seat as if accepting the information.

“You have got to relax,” Xena chuckled.

“I’m trying not to be judgy or assume that a werewolf might harm him.” She cleaned off her plate and stood up from the table. Odette took up Xena’s empty plate and took both to the sink.

“Your dog is just as big as Jeremy and has the added advantage of being on fire. I think he’ll be fine.” Xena twisted to stand up from the table. She flipped on the tap and took the sponge out of Odette’s hands. The cocked brow told Odette not to push her luck. Odette slid back against the other counter as Xena scrubbed off her plate and Odette’s.

“But he’s a baby, he could get hurt!” Odette folded her arms around her.

A shriek came from the driveway. Xena’s stomach dropped into her feet as Odette flung into action. She flew across the ground, her bare feet barely touching the hardwood. Xena and Dinah shared a petrified gaze as they charged after her. Xena rounded the back porch to the yard full of animals she never imagined would ever bring her sheer terror. Then she stared at Odette fighting her own hound. She cried, hands trembling to pull the legs of a rooster out of Rufus’ mouth. Xena stumbled off the porch as Odette begged Rufus to ‘drop it’. Rufus only tugged as if he were playing a gnarly game of tug-o-war.

“Look! The dog’s super smart, he snatched up a rooster like I suggested!” Dinah cheered.

Xena smacked her father upside the head. “Dad.” Before she stepped out into the gravel. Odette let go of the dead bird’s feet. “Odette, it’s fine, it’s just a rooster, we’ve got too many as it is if he kills one It’s not a problem.”

Odette whirled toward her, tears streaming down her face. “I don’t care about the *stupid chicken*! What if Rufus chokes on a talon or can’t cough up the feathers! He’s never eaten a live animal before!”

Xena put her hands up in front of her. She tried not to laugh. If she laughed Odette would turn her into a crisp. Smoke already floated up from her hands as she swiped tears off her face. Rufus also gave off plumes of smoke as he licked his chops and his bloody paws. Odette sobbed as she failed to dry her panic-induced tears. Xena swallowed the laughter and stifled the smile.

Was it wrong to think she looked adorable in an oversized t-shirt, no shoes, sobbing over a ‘stupid chicken’? *Probably*.

Xena patted the air tenderly. “I’m pretty sure he’s doing just fine.”

“You don’t know that! He’s just a baby!” Odette lashed out, fire-spitting out of her fingertips as she wrenched toward Rufus. He scurried away from her to keep licking the blood off his paws. Odette turned her

tearful rage back toward Xena. “Stop. Laughing. It’s not funny! It could ruin his digestive tract. Those bones weren’t cooked properly!”

Xena sputtered, “Cooked? He’s a hell hound!” She waved at Rufus’ smoking fur. “He could fry an egg by staring at it too long!”

“Bet he made some finger-lickin’ good fried chicken. We should teach him to take naps under the spit in the yard, we could roast a whole hog in under an hour.” Dinah leaned against the fence post.

Flames licked up her arms as she let out a frustrated scream. She tried and failed again to corner Rufus. He scattered the chickens across the yard. The birds’ squawked and ducked out of the way as the hellhound bolted across the yard.

“He’s *never* not listened to me.” Odette snapped her fingers and pointed to the gravel in front of her. The flames on her hands sparked purple and green with magic. Rufus ducked into a barn and out of sight. Odette let out a low whine. Xena rumbled with laughter she couldn’t hold in anymore. Odette whirled to face her.

Xena knew she messed up seconds before she felt it. A fireball the size of a frisbee smacked into her chest. Knocking her back with the force of a boulder, she skittered across the ground. It snuffed out upon impact, but not before burning through her long sleeve shirt. Her abs stung as fresh morning air rolled over her flambeed stomach.

“You going to let her just whoop you like that?” Dinah sat on the fence.

“Shut. Up,” Xena ground out the words through gritted teeth. She clawed her way back up.

Odette put out her hands beside her, eyebrows raised in challenge. Xena rubbed her nostrils with the back of her hand. Then she got to her feet, taking up a handful of rocks. She tossed them at Odette who covered her face. Xena launched across the gravel and grappled Odette. Odette expelled air between them and launched them into the sides of separate barns. Xena groaned at the pain that filled her back. She stretched out and cracked the joints in her shoulders. Relief filled her body. She scanned for Odette.

Odette pouted but turned her attention to Rufus trotting back toward her. “You are a very, very bad boy, Rufus. We’ve talked about this.”

Xena slumped against the barn. Relieved to see Odette muttering to her dog and not pointing more fire in her direction, Xena sighed. Then Dinah caught her eye as he walked back toward the house. There was a smile on

his lips. One Xena hadn't seen in a long time. She pushed off the barn fully. Dusting her hands off.

"If he gets even a stomachache, I swear on a dragon's horde," Odette warned. She tiptoed across the gravel as best she could with Rufus on her heels.

"Please, Jeremy's eaten loads of chickens and look at how long he's lived." Xena glanced at Jeremy. The werewolf lounged out in the middle of his yard, picking his teeth with his claws. Suddenly, she understood where Rufus got the idea. Xena made a mental note to berate the old werewolf later about teaching the puppy new things.

"I should get going. I'm not trying to pry another dead chicken out of his mouth or him out of a werelion's mouth." Odette hugged herself. Rufus nuzzled his cleaned face up against her bare thighs.

"We don't have any were-lions, but apparently we have were-armadillos." Xena motioned for her to lead the way.

"Those aren't a thing," Odette scoffed.

"You'd be surprised." Xena patted the top of her head. She avoided the swatting hands of Odette. Then she guided them back upstairs to change. "I need to shower and get ready for work."

Odette analyzed herself. "I'll take a shower at home, but I can't possibly go in like this."

"What?" Xena poked Odette in the shoulder and spun the Fae woman to face her. The peaceful day of work she wanted was in danger. "You are not going in."

"Of course, I am." Odette rolled her eyes.

"No, you take your micromanaging self home and stay far away from your email and the office." Xena waved for her to 'shoo' away as she pulled fresh clothing out of the closet.

"This is Alistair's first day." Odette followed Xena into the bathroom doorway.

Xena stopped, pivoting on her heels sharply and grabbing the door. "And it's the perfect time to train him without you scaring him or breathing down his neck." Xena slowly closed the door.

"But there's too much to get done," Odette called through the wooden door.

Xena flipped on her shower. "And there will be even more when you get back to work tomorrow!"

"Fine!"
"Fine!"



Odette dried off her hair and pulled it up into an old t-shirt. She stepped over the slumbering Rufus toward her bathroom counter. Clipping the fabric into place, she flipped on the tap. After her teeth were brushed and deodorant applied, she stared at her reflection. Stuck to the top corner of the framed mirror was a polaroid of her and Clara. She'd almost taken it down three times now. Clara swung in Odette's arm at the park where Odette eventually proposed. Their happy smiles bore onto Odette. Until today, when she snatched it and shredded it into the trashcan. She dusted her hands off on her sweatpants and t-shirt.

Odette popped open her medicine cabinet to find her floss. Inside sat Clara's old collection of mini perfume bottles. She bent to grab her trash can. Then she swept the bottles out of the cabinet directly into the trash. The only thing left standing was her floss. Odette carved out her gums as she set her trashcan back down. It toppled left then right before flopping to the side. With a sigh, she finished her teeth and scraped the trash up. However, on her knees in front of her bathroom sink, she pulled open the cabinet doors. As she dropped the last bottle of perfume back into the can, she stared into an endless sea of Clara. Old boxes of hair dye she never used, hair curlers and dryers she stopped using. All of them things Odette bought. Always providing Clara with whatever she wanted. *Including hair scrunchies that she never used.* Odette checked the dates on the dye and tossed the expired ones.

Her crystal pad dinged from the bed. Odette nearly knocked herself unconscious scrambling out from under the sink. She whined as the family text message lit up with new messages. Not that she didn't like talking to her siblings more. She loved them. Odette and her sisters had always been close. In the last two years, they all seemed to be stuck doing their own thing. Yet the second she started a new text group for just the Plum children, it was like they never stopped talking. Giselle flooded the chat with ideas of ways to raise funds for the academy. Aurora agreed with an

art trade or deal. Charming tried to weasel in the idea of a nature reserve on the land. All the sisters shot him down.

But Odette had wanted to see someone else's text on her screen.

She didn't need Xena to text her. Obviously, without Odette there to keep her focused and on task, she was strung out. *Overworked and overwhelmed, training and pulled a hundred different ways.* Clearly, no time to text her or inquire about how she was doing. Odette promised not to butt into work or even touch her email. She had 'cleaning and chores' to do at her house anyway. *And still, every text or alert on her pad left her spiraling.*

Rufus poked his head up from the bathroom floor. Odette jolted from her longing stare at her blank screen. Rufus crept to his feet, hackles standing up in the air. Teeth bared, a low growl emanating from his throat, Rufus stalked toward the door. Odette hesitated at her bedroom door. Then she could hear the hushed whispers by her door. A sudden bang on her door knocked Odette to the floor.

Rufus lost his mind. Barking and howling, his voice bounced off the walls. Odette crawled to her feet. "Rufus, please, inside voice."

Rufus spared her a glance, quieting his howls to a low woof. He continued to point and snarl at the front door. Another bang followed by uncoordinated knocking from several hands filled the living room. Odette groaned as she put a hand on Rufus's head.

"You know, you all are complete clowns!" Odette called as she stormed to her front door. She ripped it open as four of her siblings toppled into her doorway. Charming broke to the floor first followed by Belle who cackled the whole way down. Giselle and Aurora kept their footing as they beamed from the doorway.

Rufus quieted. His head cocked to the side in confusion. All four of her closest siblings scrambled inside and tackled Odette into a wall. Her door swung shut behind them.

Charming, the tallest of all the siblings, with bouncy black curls and a baby face, nuzzled her hard on the cheek. Odette peeled him off her. Giselle, the shortest with choppy carrot hair and freckles on every inch of her skin, poked at her side. Aurora, the only blond of the family, headed for her fridge without an invitation. Belle, the only sister who couldn't fill out a shirt or shorts, poked around her herb cabinet. Odette rubbed her

temples as her siblings filled her space. Rufus sniffed and tracked all of them separately around the house.

“Get out of my fridge.” Odette pointed at Aurora.

Aurora stuffed the cheese bread from Odette’s fridge in her mouth and put up both fists. Odette put up her own fists. Then Aurora and she broke into a swatting fight. Which gave Giselle the opportunity to steal the bread out from her sister’s teeth and shovel it into her mouth.

“Hey! I licked that!” Aurora huffed.

“Five-second rule,” Giselle murmured through a mouth full of bread.

“That’s not how that works.” Odette ripped open her fridge and tossed a water bottle at all her siblings. She didn’t intend to hit them. *But if she did, it was bonus points.* Odette cracked her own open and tossed it back.

“You just hop out of the shower?” Aurora sniffed Odette’s exposed arm. Odette wrenched her arm away. Aurora cackled, “Smells fresh. Like the smell of someone fresh out of a toxic relationship.”

“Ha, ha, I see what you did there.” Odette rolled her eyes.

“Took you long enough.” Giselle stepped out into the living room. She offered a hand to Rufus, who sniffed her skin hard. She ruffled the top of his head.

“How did you know we broke up?” Odette cocked a brow as she leaned against one of the walls.

“Oh, please, other than you not wearing the engagement ring at dinner last week?” Charming scoffed. He flopped onto her couch and stretched out.

“You also offered to host a sibling’s night here where we could talk about our plan to save our home.” Belle lifted and examined all the bottles in the herb cabinet. She shook the jars of potions, watching them swirl inside the glass. Then she popped open a jar with leaves in it and sniffed. With a smile, she pulled one out and stuck it on her tongue.

“And? How is that evidence?” Odette grimaced.

“When Clara was around, we were never allowed here.” Giselle perched herself on the arm of the couch. Like a barn owl without shoes, she hugged her knees to her chest.

“Of course, you were, this was my home.” Odette waved off the comment.

“We tried, twice.” Aurora bumped up against Odette’s side. “But when she was here, you didn’t have time for us or didn’t have energy, or worse,

she straight up told me the last time we grabbed lunch together that I was interfering in her relationship with you.”

“Oh! Yeah, she gave that aura.” Belle closed the cabinet. Sucking on her leaf, she poked about what was left of Odette’s living room. There hadn’t been much in it in the first place. Yet as Clara cleared out of the space it seemed emptier every day. Belle tapped her sneakers against the coffee table. She glanced up at Odette. “She also told me that you were lucky she was dating you and that we shouldn’t mess that up for you.”

“Why didn’t any of you tell me?” Odette crossed her arms under her chest.

“You’ve always been a romantic. If we tried to pry you out of her grubby hands, you’d just put yourself back in them.” Charming folded his arms behind his head.

Odette hated how true the words rang. It stung her insides to hear the words said out loud. Because had she not come to see Clara for who she was, she would have probably stayed with her. *Things might not have turned out the way they had.* Odette untucked her t-shirt from around her head and let her wavy, red hair tumble around her. Aurora raked her fingers through it tenderly, breaking up her large waves into smaller curls. Then Aurora rubbed Odette’s back between her shoulder blades.

“She cheated on me.” The confession broke the silence as all her siblings fumbled toward her. Charming tucked and rolled off the couch before scrambling forward. Giselle and Belle launched toward her. Aurora froze beside her.

“She did not,” Giselle hissed.

“Said it to my face when she left the first time.” Odette pursed her lips.

“Where’s she living, just asking, for a friend.” Aurora picked at her sharp nails, also decorated in runes.

“Back with her parents,” Odette laughed. “No one burn her parent’s house down. They’re nice people, even if their daughter is Clara.”

“I make no promises,” Aurora snickered.

“What can we do?” Belle smiled softly. Taking up Odette’s hand tenderly, her sister squeezed their palms together. Odette squeezed it back.

The tears welled up in her eyes on their own as Odette’s lips trembled. A weight crumbled off her shoulders as she sank back into her wall. “This was *our* home. But there’s so much of her still here. I started in the bathroom and everywhere I turn I keep finding her.”

“Say less, we’re on it! I’ll clean out the fridge!” Aurora punched her fist into the air.

“You stay out of my fridge you Fae blackhole. That’s *my* food!” Odette flicked her sister across the bridge of her nose. Aurora howled with laughter and dove into her sister. Odette shrieked and barreled down the hall. All the siblings stormed the bedroom like a herd of elephants over the heads of her downstairs neighbors. Aurora and Giselle poked about her nearly empty room, opening drawers and the closet door. Belle poked her head into the bathroom.

Odette wheezed for air as Charming tackled her onto her mattress. Untucking the bedsheets and cover in one swoop, Charming snickered. Odette tossed him off her into the wall the bed was tucked against. He clambered to his sneaker-covered feet and bounced on her mattress.

“This is a nice mattress, you got here, I like this mattress.” Charming spun in circles in the air with every bounce.

“Charming, get off that! Those are sheets Clara slept in.” Belle snatched her brother’s arm and pulled him down from the bed.

Charming audibly gagged. Hands trembling, he tried to shake the imaginary germs off his body. He tossed himself into her bathroom and scrubbed his arms. “Gross! I’m never going to get these germs off me.”

“Typical baby brother.” The girls all sighed in unison.

“Always got to make it about you, don’t you?” Giselle tossed an empty hanger at his head.

“Because it *is* all about me,” Charming scoffed, drying his hands on his pants.

Odette pulled up the comforter and sheets. Maybe she should replace them. *Could she replace the whole mattress this afternoon?* She folded up the comforter and sheets at the end of the bed. Odette undressed the pillows and folded their covers. Only to stop at the pillows on Clara’s usual side. A trash bag appeared beside her. It floated in the air. Not that it mattered which sibling cast the spell. She dropped the pillow into the bag and watched it disappear into the plastic. She dropped the sheets and blankets into it as well.

“I have to give you props, at least you made your bed. And I know you wash your sheets.” Giselle picked through Odette’s closet.

“You steal any of my clothes, and I will steal your toes,” Odette warned with a sharp glare at both her sisters in her closet.

“Like I would fit in any of your tops.” Belle held up one of her blouses against her flat chest.

“I would.” Giselle hip-checked Belle into the doorframe. Tossing out a silver pair of leggings into the room, she pointed at them with an accusatory finger. “Clara’s.”

“Clara’s.” Odette nodded as she tossed all the pillows into the trash bag. It wouldn’t be too huge a task to run down to the store later and buy a whole new bed set.

“In the trash.” Aurora snatched up the leggings.

“Odette, do you use half the shit under this sink?” Charming dug through the cabinet.

“The hairdryer stays and any hair dye you all can take if you want. Everything else is hers.” Odette sat down on her naked mattress. Charming cast multiple hair torture devices into the air. They floated over the sink for a second before zipping through the air. Dropping into the trash bag, they disappeared. Charming set all the boxes of hair dye aside.

Odette watched her siblings pick through the discarded pieces of her love life and toss out all of Clara. Giselle and Belle found every piece of flashy, socialite clothing in her closet. As if they didn’t even question what didn’t belong. *As if it stuck out like a sore thumb.* Odette traced her fingers over the top of her bedside table. The top drawer whispered at her. *The shame drawer.* It knew her secret and threatened to expose her. Then Aurora appeared beside her. Aurora put Odette’s crystal pad on top of the side table.

Both their eyes met as Odette put a hand over the drawer.

“What’s in there?” Aurora planted her hands on her hips.

“Nothing,” Odette lied.

“Bull.” Aurora whipped her hand up into the air. Her magic flung Odette back across the mattress. Odette couldn’t scramble back fast enough. Aurora pulled the drawer open. All the used toys and intimate pictures Clara gave her were tossed out into the air.

“Ew,” Charming gagged.

“These have got to go.” Aurora snapped her fingers as all the soiled equipment flew out of the drawer. “When were you going to toss them?”

“It’s not like I was ever going to use them again. I just started clearing everything out, okay.” Odette snatched up the photos and tossed them into the bag. Once the drawer was empty of everything but one bottle of lube,

Odette kicked it closed. The rumble of the drawers knocked her crystal pad off the tabletop. Odette picked it up and froze.

A text from Xena lingered on her screen. ‘Hope you’re relaxing and recouping from last night.’

“What happened last night?” Aurora and Charming pried the crystal pad out of her hands.

Odette snapped the pad out of their hands and into her pocket dimension. Her cheeks burned enough to start a fire. Her flesh stung as she turned to the next drawer on her nightstand.

“You know, her bed was unusually well made for someone who probably just woke up an hour ago on her day off.” Giselle poked her head out of the closet.

“And Rufus smells like a farm.” Belle stared down at the slumbering pup.

“And dad said something about you having a date just the other day.” Aurora wiggled her eyebrows suggestively at Odette.

“It was one date!” Odette exploded, her ears aching from the blush. She tossed out endless junk and pieces of Clara’s costume jewelry she kept in the bedside table. Furiously covering up the intense stares from her siblings, she emptied the whole table.

“One date that is hoping you’re relaxing.”

“Well, she made it clear I wasn’t allowed to come to *micromanage* her at work or even touch my email so it’s not like I have much else to do.” Odette tossed her hands out to her side.

She froze. All her siblings broke into devilish smirks. She glanced up at them. They all crossed their arms and beamed down at her. Odette sighed. Rolling her eyes, she motioned for them to give it to her.

“So, they’re a coworker!” Giselle giggled.

“Not just any co-worker, huh? Because Odette wouldn’t date an employee or a subordinate.” Charming shared a knowing smile with Belle.

“So, who works at the same level as Odette?” Aurora turned to face the others with confusion.

“Well, according to the news report and the local gossip rag, Xena Battlemoar is her Co-Vice President.” Belle leaned against the door frame.

“No!” Aurora gasped. She spun to face Odette. “But you hate her.”

“Maybe hate’s a strong word,” Charming sneered.

“So did you just rebound with her, or is this like, a thing?” Giselle returned to the closet to pick through things.

“Does it matter? Xena’s hot!” Aurora scoffed, “She’s like tall as a tree and she swings a sword. Like, who doesn’t love women swinging swords.”

“If I had wanted to be attacked by multiple people, I would have just gone into work.” Odette flopped back against her mattress.

“What? No! This is the first time we’ve hung out in ages. I haven’t had enough time to pester you.” Aurora flopped down onto the mattress next to her. “So, does Xena have a farm? Is that where you and Rufus were last night? Did she sweep you off your feet? Like literally? I bet she could. She’s got muscles for days. Is her butt toned too? Did you squeeze it? If you didn’t, will you?”

Odette glared at Aurora. Aurora made two lollipops appear out of thin air and popped one directly into her mouth. She offered the other to Odette who shook her head. Charming snatched it and bounced onto the mattress behind them.

“Whose suitcase is this?” Belle hollered from inside the closet.

“What color is it?” Odette lifted her head up so she could see her sister holding up a bag. The identical bag to the one Clara dragged back with her. “Clara’s.”

“It’s heavy, what’d she pack in here? A brick?” Giselle tossed it across the floor. It hit the floor with a thud that rumbled against the blank walls. Odette grimaced. Her downstairs neighbors were surely going to complain to management. *Might be lucky, and they were at work.* Where she would rather be.

“I wouldn’t put it past her.” Belle knelt beside the bag and opened it. “Gross, clothes, used underwear, jewelry. Oh, wait. What are these?”

Odette sat up fully and took the photos in Belle’s hands. “More of her nudes probably, she took a lot of them.”

“Well, at least one set of boobs in those is hers then.” Belle tossed the clothing into the floating trash bag.

“One set?” Odette blinked as she flipped the photos in her palm. She held about seven photos that clearly depicted Clara in various naked positions. *On an eerily familiar bed set.* Odette’s stomach turned into a twist tie. She scoured over the photos. The pillows and matching comforter, the walls, the identical bathroom, and closet doors. In the last

one, she found a clear picture of Clara digging into her bedside table. The same drawers she just emptied.

“Please don’t tell me these are of you.” Charming hesitated to look over Odette’s shoulder.

Tears welled up in Odette’s eyes. *This was their room.* Stills of *their* bedroom being used as a background. Odette’s hands trembled. Clara’s face between someone else’s thighs. Her lipstick smudging against someone else’s collarbone. Using toys Odette bought to please her, to please someone else. Her heart ached deep in the hollows of her chest. That woman wasn’t Odette. Clara smiled and slept with someone else in their bed, generously.

“I don’t think that’s Odette,” Aurora exhaled.

“She took these here.” Odette dropped them into Aurora’s hands. Her knees wobbled as she climbed to her feet. Every inch of her skin needed scrubbing. She spun around in her bedroom slowly. The film of her disgust and heartache built over her skin. Images of her and Clara snuggled in the bed blurred her vision. “She was telling the truth. She really did cheat. And she did it here. She took pictures like trophies and kept them with her!” Odette gasped for air.

“Odette.” Belle tenderly placed a hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“She never *once* did that with me!” Odette pointed at the photos. “Why would she keep the photos?”

“To use as a weapon against you.” Aurora dumped the photos into the trash. “She brought them with her in case she needed to weaponize it against you. Guaranteed. What happened when you broke it off?”

“We were at the ball! The raw magic catastrophe happened, and I told her to go home. She tried to make me take her home. But I couldn’t leave. She made me choose between her and my job again. And I chose my job again.” Odette’s voice wavered as she choked on her own saliva. Her trembling hands cupped her mouth. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She gasped for air. Belle rubbed her back in soothing circles.

“I can only imagine she would have pulled them out at some point, to show you how good she can be.” Aurora closed the bag. It shriveled up in the air like a deflating balloon. The trash bag flew around, shrinking with every second until it landed in her bathroom trash. Aurora stood up and wrapped her arms around Odette.

Odette broke into her sister's arms. Her fingers burrowed into Aurora's back. "I'm so stupid for letting her back in."

"You're not stupid," Belle murmured into her ear.

"I couldn't see it. She ruined every inch of this place. This was our home! This was supposed to be *our home!*" Odette's chest concaved and her heart shattered. Despite all she did to cover up the pain or forget about it, she hadn't. Odette hadn't fully mourned. She loved a woman who only loved herself for years she would never get back. Odette sobbed into Aurora's shoulder. "I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid." Aurora nuzzled her face into Odette's hair.

A shared moment of silence as Odette found her strength again. She clutched onto Aurora until the tears stopped. Then she swiped the tears off her face. A ding sounded over her head. Odette left her crystal in her pocket dimension and headed for her closet.

"Who's hungry? I'll feed whoever wants to help me buy a new mattress."

"Oh, I'm so down." Aurora followed her into the closet. "Can we get pizza?"

"Yes! The huge slices from the giant's pizzeria in town? Their cheese pizza is mystical." Charming took up one side of the mattress while Belle took the other. Inch by inch they hoisted it up into the air. Giselle brought out a new bag and stretched it out for the mattress. They stuffed the box spring and mattress into a magic trash bag.

Odette removed her sweats to tug on a pair of jeans. Aurora lingered in the closet doorway as Odette changed.

"You know, you've never thought of yourself as stupid before." Aurora tossed her sister a top to go with her jeans. Odette pulled on a bra and a comfy blouse.

"I've never felt so stupid in my life." Odette slid socks over her toes.

"I don't think Xena would agree." Aurora picked out a pair of boots.

She wouldn't. Odette stepped into the shoes in silence.

Chapter Thirteen:

Focus, Xena repeated in her mind as she rounded the next corner behind Odette and Charlie. The reporter, from the online journal, published daily updates on everything and anything in King's Fall. Charlie had agreed at the ball to a tour of Knights&Mage. Xena thought that meant sending anyone to drag Charlie around the building. Unfortunately, it meant Odette and Xena toured with the inquisitive reporter. Odette took over much of the conversation, steering Charlie left and right. Xena wasn't needed. *But she was required to stay.*

Per the deadly glare Odette gave her this morning for even suggesting she do this alone, Xena stayed with them. Hands tucked in her pockets, she trailed a step or two behind the shorter women. Thankfully after an hour, they were on their way back to the lobby. Charlie blabbered about how impressed she was with their facility. Odette beamed with pride.

Xena did enjoy hearing someone boost their egos. It was nice to hear other people appreciate their hard work. Since the last email, Ash stayed completely quiet. Xena could not tell their standing with the boss. Grecia was less than helpful with information. Xena soaked up the compliments from Charlie.

"Isn't that right, Xena?" Odette smiled up at Xena.

"Absolutely," Xena chimed in, flashing Charlie a smirk.

Charlie nearly skipped across the foyer to take some last-minute photos. Odette stepped beside Xena and then subtly elbowed her in the side.

"Ow, what was that?" Xena cocked her brow.

"You didn't hear a word I said, did you?" Odette kept her eyes on Charlie but twisted her body toward Xena.

"No, I started tuning out once you began to explain the process for putting a patten on products." Xena tossed an arm over Odette's shoulders and rested her weight against her. Odette froze under her touch. Xena smirked to herself as she wheeled Odette away from the lobby.

"Wait, we need to make sure she leaves in one piece." Odette dug in her heels.

“She is taking photos of the chandelier while backing toward the door. I think she’s made it safely out the door.” Xena slid her hand to the middle of Odette’s back and shoved. Odette jumped in front of Xena and put a finger in her face.

“Manhandle me again, see what happens,” Odette warned.

“Don’t make me throw you over my shoulder,” Xena snickered.

Odette poked her hard in the collar bone. “You’re going to give people the wrong impression. Or have you forgotten we’re at work?” She planted both her hands on her hips. Xena’s lips curled into a smile. Cheek’s red from blushing, the tips of Odette’s pointy ears matched her hair. Pieces of her hair fell into her face. Odette blew them out of her face in frustration.

Xena knew better. Truly she did know better. *But she couldn’t stop.* Her hand brushed the pieces of hair back behind Odette’s ear. In a lobby full of people, cameras, and one nosy reporter, she shouldn’t be affectionate. Yet her fingers lingered at Odette’s jawline as she traced it down to her chin. Her hand dropped to her side. Odette stared up at Xena with her ocean blues shimmering. Xena’s chest clenched tight.

“Careful, someone might get the impression you’re nice to me,” Odette exhaled. Her jaw tightened as she visibly swallowed. Patting her palms against her skirt, Odette stepped back from Xena. She brushed her hair back with her fingers and fixed the bobby pins in her hair.

Xena smirked. “Careful, people might think you’re not mean.” Xena poked Odette dead center in the forehead.

Odette huffed, “I am not mean.”

“My charred shirt begs to differ,” Xena chuckled.

“Well, maybe next time you’ll know better than to laugh at me when I’m upset.” Odette crossed her arms, cocked out her hip, and pouted. A full, lip stuck out, eyes glancing away, eyebrows knitted down pout.

“But you’re *adorable* when you’re throwing a fit.”

The words came out without permission. Odette’s pout disappeared in the blink of an eye. Their gazes locked. Xena’s heart flipped hard in her chest. Butterflies knotted up her stomach. When did she start feeling nervous? Her palms burned as she stuffed them deep into her pockets. Odette blinked rapidly, rebooting herself. Busying herself with fluffing out her skirt, she broke eye contact. Xena leaned back on her heels. *They were at work.* She reminded herself they were at work. They made a rule about work.

“Sorry, we’re at work.” Xena inhaled steadily before exhaling slower, “We made a rule. I won’t break it.”

“It’s not like that was anything bad.” Odette nervously glanced up and then toward the door. She watched the crowd of people that weaved in and out of the lobby. Elevators chimed around them as employees and clients turned into background noise. Xena’s attention stayed glued to Odette. Odette stepped tentatively backward to the elevator for their level. Xena followed her step for step. Odette’s attention stayed on Charlie as she headed for the front door. Then she peered up at Xena with a mischievous smile. “You’ve said worse.”

“Do you want me to say worse? *Princess*?” Xena cocked her head to the side.

“Xena!” Odette swatted at her bicep. “There are people around.”

Xena leaned over Odette to press the button on the side of the elevator. She stopped by Odette’s ear, “Well then stop flirting with me.”

Xena watched the blush burn across Odette’s face in an instant. It raided her throat and across the bridge of her nose. Odette slapped her arm harder with a glare. “I am not *flirting* with you. I was merely stating the facts.”

“Yes, stating the facts... *flirtily*,” Xena mused.

“I was not!” Odette exhaled sharply out of her nose.

Xena stifled the laughter that bubbled up within her. One hand over her mouth, stiff shoulders that trembled. Odette whirled away from her to face the elevator. Xena stole the time to lean back on her heels and fully devour Odette in her entirety. She wore her classic black, pleated suspender skirt with a white button-down blouse, silver hearts hidden along her collar and the cuffs. She wore black stockings, but Xena didn’t see the sheer heart design cut out on the back of her thighs until then. Odette patted down her skirt nervously. Xena licked her lips. Leaning forward, she pressed the button again. Odette stiffened, watching Xena reach over her and stop close to her face again.

“Why would I *flirt* with my nemesis.” She hissed.

“That is not what you called me in the woods,” Xena whispered.

Odette jumped before shuffling away from Xena frantically. Xena couldn’t help the laugh that fell off her lips. Odette stuffed her fists into her biceps, but plumes of smoke rose behind her.

“Careful, you’ll catch your skirt on fire.” Xena nodded her chin at Odette’s skirt.

“Careful, you might catch on fire.” Odette chewed on the inside of her cheeks.

“Might be worth it.” Xena turned to the elevator. Her eyebrows knitted down as she realized it hadn’t moved an inch. “Where is it? The moon.”

“Oh! Right.” Odette waved her hand at the elevator. Immediately, the doors chimed and swished open.

Xena’s mouth dropped open. Odette avoided her gaze. Xena stepped into the doorway to hold it open and pointed to the inside. “Get in this elevator and it better not have an issue getting to our level. We have too much to do today.”

“Who are you giving me orders?” Odette scoffed while she stomped into the elevator. Arms crossed under her chest as she twirled to lean her back into the back wall of the elevator. “You don’t have to remind me how much work we have to do. Had you worked hard enough on my day off we might have less to do today?”

Xena stepped inside and watched the doors shut. Her back to the silver doors, her gaze bearing down on Odette. Odette locked eyes with her, challenging her with a raised brow. Xena narrowed her eyes. Odette sneered up at her. Xena scowled. “You’re being a brat.”

Odette blinked rapidly, wheeling back as if Xena had slapped her. She opened her mouth as if to fight back but stopped. Her eyes darted past Xena, through the glass panels of the elevator. Shock and horror pinched her face up in the middle. Xena whipped around and slapped at the ‘open door’ button without question. Odette elbowed past her, scrambling into the lobby. Xena reached out to stop her. Then her gaze landed on Clara at the security check. They put out a hand to stop Clara, but she ducked under their hands like it were caution tape. She charged across the lobby.

“Clara, you are not authorized to be here. You need to leave.” Odette stormed toward Clara, her nails already smoking.

Xena felt a strange wave of rage and concern. She pulled out her phone from her pocket and dialed Samosa with a flick of her thumb.

“Tell your attention whore sister to keep my name out of her mouth!” Clara shrieked, barely an arm’s length from Odette before she struck. The slap sounded across the lobby, bouncing off walls and

silencing every conversation. Clara held her reddening palm to match the embarrassed rage coloring her cheeks.

Xena had only connected the call when she witnessed Odette stumble to the side. Clutching her face, Odette froze. Xena lurched after her. Samosa's voice in the background of the phone didn't fully reach the goliath's ears. Security scrambled to grab Clara who howled like a wounded fox. Xena's phone hit the lobby floor. Her hands cupped Odette's face, but Odette wasn't looking at her. She stared directly at Clara with murderous intent wafting off her. Odette shoved Xena away from her. Her palms ignited at her sides.

Xena snatched Odette by the wrist and dragged both of her hands backward. Pain lit up her nervous system as the flame licked up Odette's arms. Xena gasped for air. Odette's fire hissed as it died like a candle doused in water. Odette glanced down to Xena's hands that smoked, black in the creases and already blistering. Pain lit up Xena's brain. Odette paled in horror.

"I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, Xena, please, forgive me. I wasn't thinking." Tears formed in her eyes as she tenderly took up Xena's crunchy hands. She was forced to pry Xena's palms off her wrists, pulling at melted flesh and broken blisters. Odette fumbled with objects falling out of thin air as she dumped vial after vial of liquid onto Xena's hands.

"What is going on here?" Samosa burst out of the elevator, her booming voice quieting even Clara's screeches. Samosa stared at Xena, hunched over in front of Odette. Odette patted liquid and gels into her hands while tears poured down her cheeks. Then Samosa turned her attention to Clara in the arms of two security officers. Clara thrashed like a wild beast caught in the act with gnashing teeth.

"She's trying to ruin me!" Clara kicked at the security that hoisted her up off the ground.

"I want her out of this building. Now," Samosa commanded. The whole room emptied within seconds. Security removed Clara from the building but not before passing her through the expelled portal. Which magically locked her out of the building. Clara screamed from outside the glass doors, pounding on them with her fists. The sounds were muffled as security pointed wands at the door. Then Samosa stopped by Odette and Xena.

Odette stopped trying to salve the wound with potions. Xena held deadly still as Odette ran an incision along her own palm with a tiny letter opener. Drawing symbols in her blood, she painted the back of Xena's hands. The pain made her heart race. Her knees wobbled. Odette had burned her shirt and thrown a fireball at her before but the fire on her hands was different. She'd never *actually* burned Xena before. The stench of roasted flesh left a metal taste in the back of her mouth. Xena swallowed. Odette hovered her hands over her newest spell symbol. The blood turned white and sank into Xena's skin as Odette muttered words in Fae.

The blisters crusted over and turned to flakey skin. Flakes of her wound fell away as the pain subsided. Before she knew it, Xena could use her hands again. She straightened up steadily. Odette grabbed up everything she dropped out of her pocket dimension and stuffed them in her arms.

"Who was that?" Samosa stepped up beside them.

"Clara." Xena tested out her grip and hands.

"My ex," Odette grimaced.

"And what was she saying?" Samosa motioned for them to follow her back upstairs. Nancy returned from the edge of the lobby to her desk. Everyone else, however, left the lobby completely. Xena eyed the doors that Clara slapped. When they locked eyes, Clara's thrashing doubled.

"We definitely need to take this conversation upstairs." Xena put a hand on Odette's back and led her away from the doors and from the silent horror beyond them. Odette hung her head, allowing them to guide her upstairs.

Despite how Xena had been the one severely hurt, she worried over Odette more. Pressing her nails to her own palm, she sealed up her flesh wound silently in the elevator. She didn't look up from the floor the whole ride upward. Xena left her hand against the center of Odette's back. Her gaze caught movement. She peered at Samosa, who stared at Odette then back at Xena expectantly.

"I don't know." Xena mouthed.

"My sister probably posted something online." Odette shuffled the things around to find her crystal pad in her arms. Odette worked to pull up her social media. She melted back against Xena's hand with a sigh. "Aurora."

“What?” Xena peered over her to spot the post on Crystalgram. Odette had pulled up her sister’s page and found the last image different from the others. A page filled with photos of paintings and a woman posing next to sculptures, at the top was a text conversation. Odette tapped it and the three saw a text exchange between obviously Aurora and someone else. Xena took a shot in the dark that it was Clara. It was a post full of images of a lengthy text conversation.

“Your sister started this?” Samosa grimaced.

“It seems she was a little upset and defensive of me. We are the closest in age. We’ve always been close. She found out Clara cheated on me in our-” Odette cleared her throat, tears welling up in her eyes again. A perfect red handprint formed on her face, darkening by the moment. Odette exhaled slowly. “My apartment. I found evidence of it and Aurora crossed the line. I appreciate her trying to pick my battles for me, but I didn’t need to invoke the wrath of Clara.”

“We should file a restraining order.” Xena put her arm out as the doors opened on the VP floor. Holding open the door, she motioned for the others to climb out. Samosa slid out, but Odette froze. She stared up at Xena in horror. Xena pushed against Odette’s back and guided her out onto the floor. “What?”

“A restraining order? Why?” Odette dug her heels in an inch outside the elevator.

“Because she came in here and attacked you, that’s why.” Xena shook her head in disbelief. “Why wouldn’t we? She came to your place of work and attacked you.”

“She slapped me. It hardly counts as an attack.” Odette struggled with her stuff. Inevitably the items fell out of her grip. She snapped her fingers before they hit the ground and they all popped out of the air.

“That’s assault.” Samosa crossed her arms.

“If Xena wouldn’t have stopped me, I would have flambeed her. I think I can forgive her for slapping me.” Odette shook her head more. “No, we don’t need to get the authorities involved.”

“Yes, we do!” Xena tossed her hands out to her side.

“You don’t have to forgive her for anything. Besides, a crispy crazy ex is not the worst thing I’ve covered up for the management of this company.” Samosa snickered to herself as she walked back into the elevator. Xena stepped out fully.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.” Xena pointed a finger at Samosa. Then she pointed that same finger at Odette. “And you and I are going to file a report at least.”

“Look I need to get started on the trespassing paperwork, it’s ten pages too long as it is. Plus, watch Video and all the other ten thousand jobs I have to do now. Xena, you need to get the accident paperwork started for her. I expect it filled out in an hour.” Samosa scowled as she clicked the elevator door shut.

Odette glared up at Xena. “I’m fine, I don’t need to do that. She’s learned her lesson.”

“Has she? I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough. Odette, she showed up to your work to cause a scene and intentionally hit you. I think that is dangerous behavior that can’t be allowed to happen again.” Xena grabbed Odette by the bicep as gently as she could before wheeling them both toward their office. “I’m going to tell Alistair when he gets back from lunch to hold down the fort while we make an official report.”

Odette pulled her arm out of Xena’s grip. She shoved the doors to the office open and stormed inside. Xena barely closed them before Odette whirled back to face her. “Do you think I’m weak or can’t handle myself? Is that it? I’m not a big strong knight or barbarian so I can’t take a slap?”

“This isn’t about if you can take a punch, Odette. Do you hear yourself? You’re forgiving her actions because you almost lost control?” Xena jabbed a finger in her face. “I thought you were angry with her.”

“I *am* angry with her!” Odette slapped her hand away.

Xena jabbed it back in her face a second time, “Then act like it! I’m starting to think maybe you still love your ex, and you’re letting it blind you to her dangerous behavior.”

“I don’t love her!” Odette jerked away from Xena, pacing down the office. She clenched her fists into tight balls. “I’m livid. I’m hostile! and I can’t act that way. I can’t file a report because then she will just file a harassment report against Aurora. Anything I do to punish her or retaliate she will take it out on my sister or worse.”

Odette turned to Xena, her hands shaking. Red painted her cheek. Her right palm moved up to cup her face.

“What happens when she shows up at your home next while you’re not there? What happens when she escalates things?” Xena gingerly stepped toward her. She stayed in the same spot, allowing Xena to stand in

front of her. Xena plucked her hand away from the bruised cheek. With a sigh, Xena put a finger under her chin and lifted her gaze. “What kind of spells do you have for bruises? Because I’ll give prissy miss this, she can sure swing.”

“It’s fine. I’m more worried about your hands.” Odette took up Xena’s hands. Xena let her manipulate them around, testing their bend. Then she squeezed her hand around Odette’s.

“Odette, what happens when she gets worse?” Xena used the back of her knuckles to lift Odette’s chin and gaze again.

“She won’t, she’s a horrible person but she’s not crazy.” Odette pulled her chin away from Xena and went back to prodding Xena’s palms.

“I’m glad you have faith in her, but I don’t. I don’t like how blasé you are about this.” Xena engulfed Odette’s hands in her own again. She pulled Odette toward her. Odette stared up at her defiantly. For a long moment, they stood in silence. Then Xena cracked a smile, “You know, I think that was the first time you looked genuinely scared of hurting me.”

Odette scoffed, rolling her eyes. She ripped her hands out of Xena’s palms and stormed toward her desk. “You weren’t my intended target, and you shouldn’t suffer because I lost control. Go on and open the accident file before Samosa drops out of the ceiling tiles like a dragon.”

Xena pulled out her phone and opened the company accident file. Starting a new one opened a file full of empty, fill in the blank, boxes. Xena followed Odette to her desk. The Fae flopped into her seat and tenderly prodded at her face. Closing her eyes, Odette winced as the pain set in. Xena studied her. *Don’t poke at a sleeping bear.* But she still didn’t enjoy how Odette reacted to the Clara threat. The thought left a layer of uneasiness on her skin like a film.

Xena grew protective of the tiny Fae woman fast. And it left her nervous that she would do something stupid. *Like father, like daughter.* They saw a wounded animal and needed to take care of it. But Xena’s wounded werewolf was a full-grown woman who was allowed to make life choices. If Odette didn’t want to take her advice, she didn’t have to take it.

It irritated Xena to no end.

Odette cracked an eye open and eyed Xena up and down. “You need help finding it?”

“Here, why don’t I patch you up before we start this,” Xena sighed. She sat on the edge of Odette’s desk. Setting her phone down, she grabbed

the arms of Odette's chair and pulled her up close.

"What are you talking about, you can't heal. You don't know any healing spells." Odette swatted at her hands. "And don't you dare suggest taping a raw steak to my face."

Xena cackled as she pulled open Odette's desk drawer. "As tempting as that is, no. I was thinking of a healing stone. I do know how to use it, you know." Xena took up the frosty stone in one hand and Odette's face in the other. She trapped her chin between her thumb and forefinger. Odette squirmed trying to free herself. Xena locked her in place by clicking on the brakes on her rolling chair.

"Hold still." Xena lightly pressed the stone to the edge of Odette's bruise.

Odette lurched in the opposite direction. "Ow! You're too rough."

Xena lightened her touch as she circled the bruise with the stone. The red blotches of skin receded away from the stone. "You didn't seem to mind my being rough in the woods," Xena breathed.

Odette's eyes snapped open to Xena's face. Xena chuckled to herself silently as she traced over Odette's face. She tried, visibly tried, to hold back a smile. But as Xena broke into a fit of giggles, Odette laughed too. Soothing the bruise on Odette's face tenderly, she tried to sober her laughter. Then Odette swatted Xena's knee.

"Stop flirting with me." Odette closed her eyes and leaned into Xena's hands.

Never. Xena said nothing as she moved her hand from Odette's chin to cup her other cheek. Her jaw fit perfectly in the mold of her palm. Xena studied Odette's face. Her round cheeks, the small nose, and the curl of her eyelashes. She'd always been pretty. *Distractingly pretty.* Odette smiled softly, leaning into Xena's touch.

Then the doors to the office burst open as Alistair burst into the room, sweating and panting. "What did I miss? I go to lunch for thirty minutes and when I come back everyone's talking about a crazy lady attacking Odette?"



Odette finished the last email on her crystal pad and hit send. She sat back in her office chair as she stared at the screen empty of communication. For the first time in a long time, she didn't have something to take home. She gazed up at Xena still stuck on the phone with someone. Xena's gaze met Odette's, her face pinched in frustration and impatience.

Odette smirked, cracking her knuckles out in front of her. Xena scowled. Tapping her fingers across the desktop, her nostrils flared as the client on the phone grew louder. Not in an angry way, but in an excited babble that drove Xena up a wall. Odette knew she was on her last straw by how she set the phone down, hit speaker, and filled the room with their client's endless chatter. Xena hung her head in her hands.

Odette opened her mouth to speak. Xena shot a finger up in the air, demanding her silence. Odette chuckled to herself. She pushed away from the desk, tucking the crystal pad into her desk. Sauntering out to the door, she popped her head out into the hall. Alistair launched from his desk, mid email, and scrambled toward her.

"Breathe, Alistair. I wanted to tell you I am heading home. Once you're done with that communication you can leave too. I think we can all use a good night's rest." Odette patted Alistair on the shoulder.

"Oh, that sounds lovely. I will certainly do my best to rest while my roommate eats cornchips loudly in the living room." Alistair nodded with a warm smile.

"Excuse me?" Odette cocked her head to the side.

"My roommate is a large bird." Alistair's face burned with embarrassment as he fumbled to correct himself. "I'm sorry, I have a pet bird. I call him my roommate because it's like living with another person."

"I have a hellhound, I understand." Odette crossed her arms under her chest as she leaned against the door frame. "What kind of bird?"

"Big?" Alistair grimaced.

"Well, I will add 'big bird owner' to your personnel file then." Odette stepped back into her office.

"I adopted him." Alistair followed her much like a puppy. He practically hung on her heels as he nervously loitered in their office.

Xena stabbed the mute button on her phone before she glanced up at Alistair. "From where?"

“Out of a dumpster? I found him upside down in a dumpster last year. He followed me home and harassed my dorm room window until I let him in. I’ve been feeding him since then. The vet thinks he’s some sort of hawk. But knowing my luck he’s probably some person cursed to be a bird,” Alistair sighed.

“I know a good curse breaker if you want to test that theory.” Xena stabbed the screen of her phone again. “Well, thank you for the information and I will have our sales department reach out to you tomorrow about this. Have a great night.”

The client said something into the microphone, but Xena hung up the phone.

“Who was that?” Odette chuckled.

“He talked so long I forgot.” Xena rubbed her face viciously. “I need a drink.”

“Shall I order you something to go?” Alistair folded his hands in front of him.

“No, I have an old man with a pub. Go on and finish up your work. I don’t want to hear you have stayed more than an hour after we leave.” Xena pointed a finger at him with a serious tone. Then she climbed to her feet and stretched out her back. The room filled with the sound of her cracking joints.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Alistair twisted from the room.

“And never call me Ma’am!” Xena bellowed after him.

“Excuse me, Ma’am, but you’re being loud. I need you to bring the volume down a notch.” Odette pushed her chair into her desk.

“Watch yourself, you’re already on thin ice,” Xena scoffed. She tucked her phone into her pocket.

“What did I do?” Odette brushed past Xena into the hallway. Xena stepped out after her and closed their office. The sound of the building closing for the evening fell like a hush over a crowd.

Employees shuffled around, closing doors, and turning off lights. Projects were locked up. Emails and stations were checked off and shut down. Then the elevator’s chime became the only sound in the development portion of the building. Odette stepped into the open elevator. Xena followed behind her. The doors slid shut and closed them in. For the last two days, things had been semi-normal. Odette gave in and let Xena call in a guardian report. They said they were unable to do much

against a public slap. But they said should she do anything again that it would be far different, as it would be a pattern. Xena didn't like the outcome, but Odette was relieved. There was a part of her that hoped they would laugh it off. She didn't want any more part in this drama.

Clara disappeared off social media and off the physical map it seemed. Most likely licking her wounds at her parents' house. Odette knew that her parents were likely talking her into letting the drama die down. They were old-school money and social standing. They always liked Odette and often praised their relationship. She didn't want to reach out to them. But she wanted them to know she wasn't pursuing legal action or anything. She had Alistair send them a notice that K&M wasn't pursuing action and that Clara was trespassed from the company building and retail locations. They didn't respond or even reach back out.

Which sleeping impossible.

The part that hoped this drama was over could never silence the part of her that worried Xena was right. That Clara would show up at night and light her apartment door on fire or worse. *What happened if she decided to break in?* Clara wasn't the type to break a lock, but her ex spent a year in prison for breaking into a mom-and-pop shop in her youth. The idea that Clara might drop out of the sky or show up in the parking garage still nagged at her. Despite easy days with the company seeming to run like a well-oiled machine, she still found herself tossing and turning.

Odette yawned in the elevator, rubbing her face with her palms.

"Watch it, that's contagious." Xena yawned harder, trying to cover it up with her hand.

"Sorry." Odette stifled the second yawn. Xena peered down at her. Odette cocked an eyebrow in question, "What?"

"You've been exhausted the last three days." Xena poked Odette in the dead center of her forehead.

"I'm not allowed to be tired after work?" Odette rolled her eyes as the doors opened. She stepped through them. Xena kept pace with her across the lobby. The usual crowds of people had thinned to the last few stragglers of employees. Nancy had already gone home. Odette waved to Evelyn as her pink employee headed for the front doors. Evelyn waved back with a wide smile before returning to her phone call. Odette's attention returned to Xena who had not stopped analyzing her since they left the elevator. "Seriously, I'm fine."

“Now I know you’re lying,” Xena scoffed.

“I’m just drained. I haven’t slept enough, and we’ve been working hard.” Odette called for the elevator to the parking garage.

“Why haven’t you slept?” Xena slid in front of the doors.

“Why are you suddenly concerned?” Odette tossed her arms out in exasperation.

“Suddenly?” Xena arched her right brow.

Odette scowled. The chime of the elevator rang over their heads, but Xena didn’t move. Odette tried to brush past her. Xena turned to an impenetrable wall, her shoulders blocking the doors. Odette motioned at the open doors and she shrugged. Odette stepped back and waited. Xena held the doors open, despite the passive-aggressive ding that played over her head to step out of the doorframe. Odette told herself Xena would give in. She slouched into the metal doors more.

“Fine! I haven’t been able to get comfy. Okay? Can I please go home? You’re holding me hostage.” Odette waved her hands in frustration at Xena.

Xena slithered back into the elevator. Odette jumped into the elevator before the doors could slam shut in revenge. Towering over her, she sent the elevator down. “Is it because of Clara?”

“No, I have a new mattress and it’s not broken in yet,” Odette retorted. Hands on her hips, she sneered at Xena confidently. Until her face broke out into a blush as the words registered in her mind.

Xena’s hands slid across her sides and rested on her lower back. Leaning over her, Xena backed Odette into the number’s panel of the elevator. Her heart raced in her chest as Xena closed in the space between them. Xena’s amber gaze devoured Odette in front of her. She would be lying if she said she didn’t like the sudden attention. Up until that moment, Xena walked on eggshells around her. For two days she didn’t even argue with her on their choice of lunch. Up until that moment, Odette didn’t realize how frustrating it felt to be coddled by Xena in such a way. As if she would break apart or disappear if she even raised her voice.

Odette’s insides stirred as she took hold of the front of Xena’s shirt.

“Is that an invitation to break your bed frame?” Xena smirked.

“You giant, you wouldn’t fit in my bed.” Odette pushed out of Xena’s grip as the door chimed and opened beside them. She slid out into the empty parking garage. A soft squeal left her throat as an arm wrapped

around her torso and hoisted her off the ground. Xena twisted them so she could pin Odette against the concrete walls of the garage. Odette's back froze against the cool stone.

Xena's free hand ran up her right thigh. "I have a history of fitting into small things." Xena closed the distance between their lips, stealing Odette's breath. She kissed Odette hungrily. Inhaling sharply as she ground into Odette. "We can always return to the woods."

"How will that fix my mattress?" Odette tugged on the collar of Xena's shirt. Her stomach twisted into knots.

"Good point." Xena kissed her harder. Steadying Odette against the wall, Xena used her knee to prop Odette up before she scooped up the back of Odette's thighs. She snuggled herself between Odette's thighs and wrapped them around her waist. Odette crossed her ankles in the small of Xena's back. She made sure to trail circles up the backside of Odette's thighs. Running her fingers down into her stockings and popping the garter clips off them.

Odette melted into the kiss. Her fingers found their way into Xena's hair and tangled them. She devoured Xena's mouth. Coffee stronger than anything she'd ever tried filled her tastebuds. Odette hated the taste of coffee in a cup but loved it on Xena's tongue. Xena slid her fingers up the inside of Odette's thighs teasingly. She whined against Xena's mouth.

Odette ripped back from the kiss as the engines of the elevator sounded behind her. Through the concrete she heard it climb its way back up to the building. *Oh yeah, work.* "We should go."

"Should I pick up dinner?" Xena helped Odette to the ground but did not back away. In fact, her hands stayed firmly gripping Odette's backside.

"No, I'll cook." Odette ducked under Xena's arm and slid out of her grip.

"You have enough food in your house for me?" Xena teased.

"Please, you were just grabbing my thick thighs and have the audacity to ask if I have enough food?" Odette brushed her hair back behind her shoulders.

"I like your thighs." Xena shrugged.

"I know, the hole in my stockings clued me in," Odette snorted. She rolled her eyes at the goofy grin plastered on Xena's face. Was it strange that she liked how much Xena grabbed them? Or how breathless it made her when Xena felt up her legs? Obviously, it was an erogenous zone, her

biggest sensitive areas were on her legs and neck. Yet she enjoyed the way Xena hungrily stared at her when Odette tried to fix her stockings. Odette never hated them. She'd never been afraid of her thick thighs. But it was funny how much sexier she saw them with the feeling of Xena's fingers buried into them.

"There are guest spots on the corner of the apartment complex. Park there." Odette didn't feel her lungs inflate fully again until she'd pulled out of the parking garage. Her palms grew moist as she gripped the steering wheel. She invited Xena over. She was going to cook for her. *Maybe she should have made her grab dinner?* She didn't have time to correct herself. She needed to get home and figure out what they would have for dinner. Rufus would be insufferable. She did not have time to walk him fully before Xena parked.

Odette should have thought it through! Yet, as she parked and watched Xena's truck pull into a guest space, her heart continued to race. She clambered out of her car and tried to dry her sweaty palms on her skirt. Xena strutted down the sidewalk toward her. Odette gripped her keys and nodded toward the building. She rushed to climb up the stairs. As much as she enjoyed the parking garage, she wasn't interested in making out in the stairwell of her apartment complex.

Xena charged up the stairs after her. "Cool it, *Princess*, I didn't stretch enough to chase you upstairs."

Odette laughed breathlessly. Her voice caught in her throat as she fumbled for the door. She opened it and slithered inside as Xena burst in behind her. Rufus launched through the air at them in the door. Odette slammed into Xena's chest, Xena slammed into the door, and Rufus wiggled happily in their arms.

Xena ruffled the top of his head from behind Odette. She struggled to remove her dog from her rib cage. Then Xena hoisted him in one arm and her in the other. Xena snickered the whole time, setting them both down. "As much as I enjoy being pinned to a door, your handle's stabbing my kidneys."

"Sorry, he really has to pee." Odette pulled his leash out of the closet. Rufus bounced up and down in front of Xena. He spun wildly, dancing as Odette fought to lock it around his collar. "Rufus, chill, please!"

“Well, then, shall we?” Xena shuffled to reopen the door again. She motioned for Rufus and Odette to lead the way.

“Oh, you don’t have to, you can sit down and relax. It’ll take us just a minute.” Odette flushed harder as she stumbled out the door. Her feet tripped over each other as her stockings rolled down again. Struggling to hold Rufus back as she tugged on her stockings. The whole time, Xena watched with a bemused smile. Odette huffed. “Don’t laugh. It’s your fault!”

“I’ll hold them up for you if you need.” Xena wiggled her brows suggestively.

Odette tripped after Rufus. Xena closed the door behind them. Odette pelted her with her keys. Cackling, she locked the door behind her. Odette managed to clip her stockings, twisted slightly but at least they stayed up as Rufus flew down the stairs. Xena kept up with them easily with her long legs. Odette followed Rufus, who hunted for a good spot to pee in the massive yard behind her apartment complex. Xena poked her hands in her pockets, lazily walking beside them.

“You have him trained to go off-leash, don’t you?” Xena cocked her head to the right.

“Oh, he can go off-leash, but the problem is control. What if someone else thinks the same thing and their sharp-toothed rat comes at Rufus. It’s easier for me to keep control of him and the situation if he’s leashed.” Odette happily slowed down as Rufus hoisted his leg and peed all over the large bush.

“Does he not pee fire? Or lava?” Xena nodded at Rufus.

“He’s a hell hound, not a lavamog or fire elemental. He drinks water and urinates it back out just like any other dog.” Odette put her hands on her hips. “I thought you were an animal expert.”

“I’m a were-rescue employee. My father is the expert, but that’s mostly on were-creatures.” Xena shrugged.

Odette scrutinized her with narrowed eyes. But they were dragged off further as Rufus bound after a new spot to poop. They followed him in peaceful silence through the ankle-high grass. Odette was thankful that no others were walking their dogs at the same time. It made their journey easier. Rufus whined as she redirected him back home after making his poop disappear with magic.

“We can come back out later Rufus. This was just a quick potty break.” Odette ruffled his hair. Rufus gave in and led her back toward the apartment. She knew that come ten at night he would demand a walk that would leave her legs numb and feet aching. That was a problem for later tonight.

Odette climbed the stairs the second time, keenly aware of Xena walking beside her. The sound of her boots against the stone and how she breathed out her nose. Odette let Xena open the door and the three of them re-entered the apartment. Rufus held still for her to unclasp him. Then he bound toward the couch to pounce. Odette tucked the leash away. Goosebumps prickled the tops of her arms and legs as Xena stepped up behind her. Soft, tender hands gripped her sides. Xena kissed the side of her throat.

“Should we eat first? Or should I see to that mattress first?” Xena murmured against her skin. Xena trailed the kisses up Odette’s throat. Following the vein in her neck, Xena stopped at her jawline.

Odette melted in her grip, falling back against her chest. “How patient do you feel?” Odette swallowed.

Xena kissed her cheek tenderly. “I can be *incredibly* patient.”

Odette shivered. Xena nuzzled her nose against the side of Odette’s face. Her kisses stopped, waiting for an answer. She held her close, her fingers tracing circles into Odette’s sides. The tiny voice in her head, that reminded her of her mother, demanded she host dinner first. Xena was a guest in her house. But that voice died as the tingles in her stomach tightened. Her organs reminded her promptly how nervous she felt driving home. She wouldn’t be able to even cut a cucumber with her nerves the way they were.

“I can’t be patient,” Odette exhaled.

Xena snickered against her cheek, tugging her backward hard against her chest. “Well then, where is this uncomfortable bed?”

Odette ripped out of her grip and nearly bolted across the foyer. She pointed a finger at Rufus who stared at her with curious eyes. “Stay,” and then she fled down the short hallway.

Xena bound after her and shut the door before Rufus could even escape the comfort of the couch. Odette barely kicked off her shoes before Xena tossed her onto the bed. She bounced over her fluffy comforter into the middle of the mattress. Xena crawled over her, capturing her in a

searing kiss. She scurried backward, her limbs tangling in Xena. Xena stretched her across the bed, pinning her hands back against new pillows. Her lips devoured her jawline then her throat. Odette squirmed out of her hands to free the buttons on her blouse before Xena manhandled her clothes to ruin. Xena bit into the crux of her neck. Odette gasped.

“It is a bit stiff.” Xena greedily dove her hands under Odette’s blouse. While Odette fought to free herself of the fabric, Xena slid behind her and popped the clasps of her bra. Odette’s clothes scattered over her head somewhere near the corner of the bed. She couldn’t tell up from down. Not as Xena’s mouth pressed hot, wet kisses down her collar.

Odette busied her trembling hands with unbuttoning Xena’s shirt. Xena steadily kissed around her chest. Then she bit down under Odette’s breast. Odette yelped at the sharpness. Xena made up for it by kissing her nipple. Odette pressed her thighs together under Xena. Her eyes clenched shut. Finally, she freed the button down and dove her hands under it. She raked her nails up Xena’s back, pulling the camisole with it. Xena let her peel her shirt off. She growled against Odette’s skin as Odette clawed nails back down her spine. Odette’s insides twisted up.

She freed Xena of her bra only to have her hands pinned above her head again. Xena captured her mouth again. “Your wanderings hands are very distracting.” Xena groaned.

“Sorry, was I overstimulating you?” Odette relaxed back against the bed. She opened her eyes in hopes of catching Xena’s expression. Xena kissed her harder. Her grip loosened and Odette sat back for a moment. Yet as Xena explored her torso and sides, her hands found their way to Xena’s sides. She ran her fingers up Xena’s rib cage, brushing at the underside of Xena’s breast. Xena gasped. Odette teased one of Xena’s nipples with the pad of her thumb. Xena snatched up her wrists again and pinned them hard against the mattress.

Xena nipped at her lower lip. “Do I need to remove the temptation?”

“You’re going to remove my arms?” Odette wheezed for air with nervous laughter bubbling out of her chest.

Xena squeezed her wrists in warning, growling against her mouth. “Keep it up, and I’ll give you something to be mouthy about.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared.” Odette squirmed under Xena’s grip. Her biceps ached slightly at the force. Yet her other muscles warmed happily at

the stress. Her lips curled into a mischievous smile. Then her stomach twisted up and her blood pressure skyrocketed. Xena pulled back from her kiss to stare down at Odette. She bore through Odette in one dominating glance before she scrambled up onto her knees.

Xena made quick work of flipping Odette onto her stomach. Warmth pooled in between her thighs as Xena sat back on her calves. She flipped Odette's skirt up and over her back. Her hands kneaded and squeezed down her lower back and over her cheeks. Odette arched her hips toward her. Xena traced the edge of her underwear. Plucking at the soft silk here and there until her fingers teased at the crease between her clenched thighs.

"Is this supposed to be something I'm mouthy about?" Odette wiggled her butt at Xena.

"No, but this is," And without warning, Xena ripped the dainty fabric off her sex.

"Hey!" Odette scrambled to sit up. Xena pinned her by the back of her shoulders back against the bed. Slowly, she slid Odette's legs out from under her and spread her thighs apart.

Xena chuckled to herself but did not respond with words. Instead responding with a thumb teasing and tracing her folds. Odette bit down into her own comforter as her insides twisted up tighter. Xena released the pressure on her back only to grip her by the hip. She hoisted Odette up onto her knees, her face down on the mattress. Odette cried out into the fabric as Xena tentatively touched her clit. Her nerves begged for release. Yet Xena held back, teasing, and barely touching her. She ached in every corner of her body.

"Please," Odette confessed. Xena pressed against her clit harder. Odette moaned at the final pressure. Then it lifted and Xena traced her slit again. Odette's fingers curled around her comforter.

"Mmm, you've been very mouthy with me," Xena purred from behind her. Her fingers returned to Odette's inner thigh and squeezed them hard. Odette groaned loudly as she kneaded them. Xena unclipped her stockings again and rolled them down to her knees. Her fingers traced patterns into the back of her thigh.

"I won't mouth off. Please, Xena," Odette begged.

"You can be mouthy." Xena's fingers found their way back to her clit. "I like you feisty. Just keep those teasing hands to yourself for now.

Are you ready to behave? Or do I need to keep you on this edge a little longer?”

“I’ll behave,” Odette swore.

Xena circled her clit firmly. Odette rocked back against her hand greedily. She slipped two digits deep into her, filling her insides. Odette gasped as she curled them and pressed them deep into her. Odette bucked into her touch. Xena let her set the pace. Her clit buzzed with desire. She could feel a long, overdue orgasm build. Lights built behind her eyes and exploded like fireworks as the coil within her snapped.

However, she wasn’t allowed to fall into her mattress and turn to Jell-o. Despite how putty she felt, Xena moved them both with expertise. Xena flopped back against the mattress, propping her head up against her pillows and set Odette over her. Odette slapped her palms against the wall for stability. Her head spun. Holding onto the wall for dear life, Odette peered down at Xena. Smugly, Xena undid her skirt and pulled it down toward her. She made Odette crawl out of it and practically sit on her face. Then Xena swiped her tongue against Odette’s sex. Odette’s stomach fluttered, her sensitive clit already demanding more.

A hard memory crawled back up into her skull. Odette where Xena was, watching Clara slap the wall enthusiastically. Odette shook the memory away.

Odette watched as Xena tenderly nursed her clit with a rhythm. Shivers ran down Odette’s back. Xena steadied a hand on the back of Odette’s left thigh. Her other fingers returned to their position, curling inside her. Odette’s legs quaked. Panting heavily, she pressed her forehead against the wall. The cool, glossy texture combatted the raging fire within her. Xena hummed into her clit and Odette bucked against her.

Clara’s face returned behind her eyelids. Odette could see her sleeping head on the pillow with her hair sprayed across the bed.

Her toes curled up into the blankets. The muscles tightened again.

Clara moaned someone’s name. It wasn’t hers.

Odette clawed her fingers against the wall. She fought to stay in the moment. She’d lost track of time or space, as she descended off a cliff.

Clara whispered ‘I love you’ in her ear. Odette choked on her own tongue.

Xena worked her steadily up to another orgasm. Longer this time, her release spread throughout her body. Her thigh muscles spasmed as she

tried her best not to fall onto Xena. Thankfully, Xena held onto her strength. She eased Odette down from the wall and over her. Odette held the rigidity of a wet noodle freshly out of boiling water. Xena lay her down beside her and curled up around her.

Exhaustion washed over her. She fought to keep her eyelids open. Xena peppered her face with soft kisses. Odette could barely process the feeling on her skin, let alone kiss her back. But when Xena kissed her lips tenderly, Odette put all she had into it.

The tears were a surprise. She gasped for air as Xena kissed her gently. Xena found her limp hands and held them. Odette curled up closer to her. As if her body desperately required her touch, she sought out more kisses. Finally, Xena pressed her back into the mattress. Their fingers locked as she hovered over her. Only a breath's width between them as Xena kissed the tears away.

"Are you alright?" Xena breathed against Odette's trembling lips.

"I don't know," Odette whimpered.

Xena pressed her forehead against Odette's. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" Odette bawled more, squeezing Xena's hands. "No, please don't leave me. I just need a minute. Like this."

Odette blinked the tears away. Xena rubbed her thumbs against the back of Odette's hands. She nuzzled her nose against Odette's tenderly. They lay in silence as Odette let the tears wash out of her. Then, staring up at Xena, a reassuring smile on her lips as she waited. Odette could hear her words again. *She could be incredibly patient.* Odette exhaled a shaky breath.

"I've probably ruined the mood," Odette muttered.

"No," Xena purred, "But I am hungry."

"I should have made dinner first." Odette sank into her mattress further.

"No, this was definitely better." Xena slid back with their hands still locked together. "I needed to release that pent-up energy."

Odette eyed her suspiciously. Xena tugged her up and off the bed with her. She broke their hands apart to press her palms against the mattress. Then she glanced up at Odette with a smirk. "Though, it could do with a bit more thrashing, shall I jump on it a few times. Piss off your downstairs neighbor?"

Odette's throat closed as she stared at Xena. She hugged her own torso, stepping back from the bed. She wanted to ask. *The words didn't form on her tongue.* Xena moved to pull her camisole back on over her torso. Odette lingered, naked, in the middle of her bedroom. Her attention kept retreating to the mattress. A film of disgust and hatred slithered over her skin the longer she stared at it. Choking on an overwhelming wave of emotions, Odette shriveled up more inward. Then Xena turned to her with a worried expression.

"Odette?"

"What about your mattress?" She barked, gasping for air.

"What about it?" Xena's gaze darted around the room. "It's far too big to fit in the doorway and it won't fit in the bed of my truck. Plus, it smells like farm. You don't want that lingering in here. It'll permeate the walls."

Odette's lips broke into a smile as she shook her head. "No, what about we sleep on your mattress tonight. At your house. Tonight."

Xena turned to her. "Yeah? I mean, I do prefer my mattress. Yours is a little stiff on my shoulders."

"Plus, it doesn't have Clara's memory on it." Odette's hands trembled against her sides. Tears welled back in her eyes again.

Xena mouthed an 'oh' before she put a hand toward Odette. Odette glanced away but took the extended hand. Xena tenderly placed kisses against her knuckles and led her across the floor. Odette shuffled her feet against the hardwood. Then her gaze was lifted by Xena putting two knuckles under her chin. Tears welled in her eyes. Xena dropped her chin so she could dab them dry.

"I hope this does not cross a boundary, and it might technically be breaking a rule, but, it will bring me great joy and immense pleasure to make you forget about her." Xena cupped Odette's cheek in a palm and lifted her knuckles to her lips with her other.

"I was sitting on your face, then crying naked in your arms, do I truly have any boundaries anymore?" Odette sputtered with a pout.

"You're upset so I will let that sarcastic remark go. However, I want you to know that you're still allowed to *have* boundaries and rules even when we've been intimate." Xena cocked her right brow up high on her forehead. Odette blushed and her pout shifted into a smile as Xena stared down at her. Then she tugged Odette's head forward and kissed the

center of her forehead. “But it is safe to say that a new rule is no sex in your apartment.”

Odette nodded silently.

“Go put something comfy on and pack a bag. I’ll get the hellhound on his leash, and we can sleep on my far superior mattress.”

Chapter Fourteen:

Xena convinced Odette to let her drive. She lied that her tiny economy car would get scuffed on the gravel. She worried more about Odette's emotional position behind the wheel. Xena also used the excuse of her being able to swing by and grab take-out for dinner. It didn't hurt mentioning Rufus would miss out on riding in the cabin with the windows half down. Odette didn't press against any of them. Which is why Xena knew something was wrong. At first, she worried she had been too mean or upset Odette by being too dominant. But the emotional response was much worse than playing too hard or overwhelmed by the orgasm. Xena hated the sullen, hollow expression Odette wore as she climbed into Xena's truck.

However, something changed as they rolled down the windows a crack and drove away from the apartment.

Odette's cheeks warmed and she hugged Rufus with a small smile. They both stared out the window like a child and her puppy on their first road trip. Her oversized purse, full of things Xena didn't see her pack, was stuffed between her knees on the floorboard. She pulled on a pair of thick black leggings under an oversized t-shirt and sneakers. Rufus stuck his full nose out the window crack and inhaled sharply while Odette ruffled his hair. Xena even stretched an arm to pet the hellhound as they rounded the corner of town toward the outskirts.

"How are you feeling?" Xena ruffled Odette's loose red waves.

Odette twisted toward her. Xena glanced away from the road only for a moment. Her breath caught up in her throat when Odette smiled at her. Xena's chest clenched as Odette slid an inch in the seat so she could sit cradled in Xena's arm. "Better. Like getting out of there lifted something off my chest."

"Good. That's good to hear," Xena swallowed on a tight rock in her throat. Her palm grew sweaty as she gripped the wheel tightly. Odette lay her head back against Xena and closed her eyes.

"I'm upset that I'm giving in, but maybe you were right." Odette exhaled through her nose steadily before inhaling slower. She folded her arms under her chest and pocked her hands in her armpits.

Xena snorted, “I’m sorry. Repeat that, did you just say I was right?”

“Don’t make me regret saying it.” Odette ripped one hand out to jab Xena in the ribs with an elbow.

“Right about what?” Xena wrapped her other arm around Odette and squeezed.

“That Clara is a problem. Maybe not in the way you thought but I obviously can’t handle it. So, I’m upset that you were right. Because it means I’m going to have to take Charming up on his offer and stay with him till I find a better place.” Odette struggled to free herself out of Xena’s arms.

Xena opened her mouth and then immediately shut it. *Because she knew what was going to fly out of it.* Xena Battlemoar, the bleeding heart, and rescuer of all things hurt and broken, was about to offer Odette to stay at her place. She thought about it when Clara attacked the building and thought Odette’s apartment could be next. She considered the pros and cons of Odette at the farm in the blink of an eye.

Obviously, the downside would be that Odette lived in her home. There would be no personal space to clear her head. *Yet even that didn’t feel like a downside.* When Xena was angry or frustrated, Odette was the only person she wanted to talk to about it. The confession in her head made her foot slip off the gas and they slowed down near a parking lot. Xena played it off by stopping to grab food from one of the many restaurants at the strip mall there.

Xena couldn’t help the crushing weight of her realization. She liked Odette. *Of course, she liked her!* They were more than coworkers, more than peers. They always had been yet in the last three weeks it felt like an eternity with Odette at her side. As she ordered take-out, waiting in the lobby of some random restaurant... she stared back out the window toward Odette. Slouching against Rufus as she brushed through her hair with a wide-toothed comb. Her eyes seemed to wander up through the windshield and catch Xena’s gaze. Odette stuck her tongue out. Xena returned the favor. Her smile grew on her lips as Odette tried to compete for sticking her tongue out harder.

Xena took up the bag of food and headed for the truck knowing that she didn’t want Odette to stay with her brother. Xena wanted Odette to stay on the farm. Yet she couldn’t just offer. Odette wouldn’t impose or

consider imposing unless she came to the idea herself. Maybe she could pay her brother to make Odette hate staying with him. *Or maybe she just had to keep offering her food and fun.* Rufus could always use the exercise! The hellhound could stay on the farm and Odette would have to come over to get him. Then Xena could make it impossible for Odette to *want* to leave.

Xena sank into her seat in the car as Odette took the food from her and guarded it against her leering hellhound. She tried to focus on the road. Xena fought for control of her own thoughts for the first time in forever. As she knew she wanted to pull a Dinah Battlemoar and obsessively throw herself into a savior project that might ultimately hurt her in the end.

Wasn't she worth it though?

"So, I have to warn you, my father is a bit corny." Xena cleared her throat and stirred up a conversation in the suffocating silence.

"I noticed. But mostly he's hilarious." Odette leaned away from Rufus with the bag of food. "You even sniff at this and I will hang you by your tail, Rufus. You got that?"

"Hilarious? He's senile." Xena rolled her eyes as she threw an arm around Odette's shoulders again. She flinched as her chest fluttered. Odette melted into her arms and lay her head back against her shoulder.

"You only think so because he's your father. You should meet mine. You'll appreciate your dad so much more." Odette smiled with her eyes closed.

"Oh? Is that an invitation to the Warlock Academy of Deathcraft? Can I even go, or will my non-caster rear end catch fire by stepping through the door?" Xena prodded Odette's side with her pointer finger. Odette squirmed away from the touch. Xena's stomach tightened.

Odette smacked her hand away. "You wouldn't stand one night with my family. Your only-child self would probably cry. Having to share or even wrestle for your food."

"You're asking the girl who spent her childhood wrestling were-bears and were-wolves if she will cry when your tiny siblings hang off my arms like tree ornaments and struggle to take me down?" Xena slowed down the truck as they rounded the corner to the gravel road. "Not to mention my father taught me how to throw a punch."

Odette cocked her head as she twisted to stare up at Xena. A sliver of emotion contorted her round features. Odette's eyebrows knitted. "Your father taught you that?"

"Of course. I didn't just buy a book at a cursed library and learn all my tricks like someone." Xena cackled as Odette punched her in the ribs to the best of her ability.

The truck came to a stop in the driveway. Rufus's tail swung like a fluffy whip in the cabin of the truck as he struggled to contain himself. Odette pushed the door open for him. Rufus sprang to his feet and barreled across the gravel. Sounds of Dinah's displeasure filled the air as a large hellhound bound up to him without warning. Jeremy's whines to play with his new friend mixed with Rufus' yapping with excitement. Peaches seemed less than pleased as Rufus bounced around the yard.

Odette scrambled after her dog, toting the bag of food and her things after her. Xena waited. She watched Odette wave to Dinah. Xena replayed the sliver of jealousy on Odette's face when she asked about her father. It wasn't teasing or smug or snarky, but Odette flashed the jealousy of a child. Xena clambered out of the truck.

"We got you something, old man," Xena called out.

"You better have you, rotten child. I had pork chops defrosted when you told me you weren't coming home for dinner. I wanted butter and garlic roasted chops, but I'll settle for hot and no dirty dishes." Dinah slammed the lid on his cans of animal food. "You two go inside and take the hound with you. He's only underfoot and we've got a schedule to keep!"

"Rufus, inside," Odette commanded, and Rufus bound toward the porch door.

Xena strutted after Odette. She set the bag of food on the table. Xena spread the dishes out on the table while Odette set up Rufus's food and frisbee aside for him. He didn't wait to dig in.

"You know, my dad taught me everything I know." Xena popped the lid off her food container.

"Oh?" Odette's face pinched as she moved to grab a glass out of the kitchen cabinet.

Xena analyzed the tension in her shoulders. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the fridge door and pulled it open. Xena sat down in

her seat and used the plastic fork to shovel some food into her mouth. Odette set her glass down at the table without another word.

“Yeah, I mean, for most of my youth, it was just us. After my mom died, he’s all I had.” Xena handed Odette a fork.

Odette’s face fell as she jerked her chin up. Her gaze was glued to Xena’s face. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. It happened when I was a kid. She’s just a good memory now.” Xena tucked Odette’s fork into her to-go container. Odette’s attention stayed on Xena. Her lips curled into a smile as she waved her palm in front of Odette. Odette blinked rapidly and looked away. Xena waited for her to take a bite into her food before she returned to her own. “You accused me of being an only child a while ago, of a single father. So, you had to know?” Xena furrowed her brow.

“Well, I knew you had a dad because I heard you talk of him before at Department head meetings. I also, just had this feeling, that you were raised by only a father. Something about how you stood and treated people.” Odette rolled her eyes.

Xena snickered, “Well, you were right.”

“I usually am.”

“I have quite a few examples of how you were wrong.” Xena kicked Odette softly under the table. Odette kicked back. Xena took a large bite and then shoved Odette on the shoulder.

Odette kicked her harder. Xena grabbed the side of Odette’s chair and yanked her across the floor. In a quick swoop of her arms, Xena hooked Odette’s legs out from in front of her chair and put them firmly in her lap. Odette wiggled to free herself. Xena trapped her legs between her thighs and one arm while she scooped food with her free arm. She smirked at Odette pouting. Propping her food container on her chest, Odette slid down in the chair to get comfortable with her legs in Xena’s lap. Then her head rolled back as Xena eased the tension on her legs and began to knead them. Started at her calf, then working up to her thigh. Xena snuck glances at Odette’s face as they ate in relative silence... minus Rufus’s shifting through his food every few minutes.

When Rufus was done, he clambered down and sat by the door. Odette stopped eating to stare at her dog.

Xena sighed, “Hey Dad! Can the hound come out now?”

“Yeah! Yeah! Can he bring me my chow?”

“No, but I can.” Odette snapped her fingers at the bag. It floated into the air and followed Rufus who let himself outside. Relaxing back in her seat, Odette’s gaze lingered at the door. “You two are very close.”

“Yeah, but you had six other siblings. I had the old man and a bunch of random animals.” Xena shrugged.

“How did I not know your mother died?” Odette huffed as she set her container down on the table.

“In your defense, up until recently, you didn’t know a lot about me,” Xena chuckled.

“Yes, I did.” Odette crossed her arms. Xena cocked a brow as Odette stared up at her from her slouched position. “Xena, I spent two years despising you. Of course, I know a lot about you. How do you think I always found something to mock you for?”

“You said spent.” Xena set her own container down.

“Well, obviously now I don’t.” Odette uncrossed her arms only to motion at the house vaguely with her hands.

“You could still hate me and sleep with me.” Xena shifted so she could pull more of Odette into her lap. She froze as Odette pushed off her chair and slipped out of her grip. Odette slid into her lap, straddling her legs with arms draped over her. Xena unfroze enough to wrap her arms around Odette’s waist.

“No, I couldn’t,” Odette murmured.

Xena pulled Odette closer to her chest, hugging her tight in her arms. Odette smiled as she folded her arms on the back of Xena’s shoulders. In the warm silence, Xena captured Odette’s lips again. This time there was no tension or tears. Odette melted into her. Shifting a hand to her shoulder blades, Xena tried not to bury her fingers into Odette’s back. Instead, she let herself drown in Odette’s soft scent of flowers and take-out, and the taste of savory dishes on her lips.

Odette broke the kiss, lingering half a breath away from another kiss. “And you don’t hate me?”

“I never did,” Xena confessed as her lungs tightened.

“Yes, you did,” Odette giggled. “But that’s okay.”

Xena held back from opening her mouth again. Instead tying up Odette’s lips with another kiss. Odette did not resist. Shifting her arms, Odette tangled her hands in Xena’s hair. The kiss stole every drop of air from Xena’s lungs. She caved in and clutched Odette with her fingers

burrowing into her back. Odette sighed against Xena's lips. Tugging on Xena's hair, Odette broke and started new kisses over and over. Then her nails lightly scrapped at the back of Xena's scalp. Xena hummed against her lips in pleasure. She repeated it and Xena nipped at her lips.

Xena didn't hear the door open or Rufus' nails against the wood. But she did hear her father clap loudly over their heads.

"Knock it off you two and take it outside, will you?"

Odette ripped backward but stayed firmly in Xena's arms. Then her gaze scanned the setting sun nearly below the horizon out the porch door. Xena smirked as she stared up into Odette's face. When Odette lowered her gaze, the glimmer in her face told Xena what she wanted to know. But she still asked, "Shall we take it outside?"

"At least I'm in better outside clothes this time." Odette scrambled out of Xena's lap.

"Everyone locked up?" Xena glanced at her father.

"I don't even want to know. Yes, everyone's locked up." Dinah tossed his and their empty containers into the trash.

"Excellent." Xena jumped to her feet and pointed at Rufus. "You, stay inside."

Odette was already on the porch as Xena shut the main door behind her, clicking the screen shut. Bending over, Odette pulled all her hair up over her head.

"The same rules still apply, *Princess*." Xena smacked her right palm against Odette's exposed backside.

Odette yelped. She sprang into action, trotting across the porch. Xena chased after her, stretching her arms. A small voice at the back of her head said that Odette probably shouldn't play after an emotional response earlier. But Xena couldn't resist the giddy look on Odette's face as she glanced over her shoulder. Maybe this would replace the memory of their earlier escapade. A redo of the evening. Xena's nerves hummed in anticipation.

Then, as soon as Odette reached the tree line, she bolted. Xena waited long enough to give Odette a fair advantage. Without her magic, Odette was only as fast as she was small. Something in seeing her fleeing with a wide smile on her face only fueled Xena's desire. She glanced back at the house as the sunburnt sky descended behind the trees. Smokey pinks

and hazy night skies peeked out from around the thick leaves. Then Xena sprang into action.

Moist evening air slapped at her hands and cheeks as she barreled through the forest. The last time she learned that Odette usually stayed on one path until she sensed Xena coming. She tended to save her energy for avoiding Xena. *Smart*. But predictable. Xena tossed herself into the branches and lumbered through the top of the trees. Odette swerved around trees as she searched for Xena in the foliage above her.

Xena dropped from the tree onto a large boulder. She spotted her prey scrambling out of view to the west. Xena bound off her stone and flew after Odette. Her boots barely touched the ground. Her lungs tightened happily at the extensive exercise. Pumping her arms, she rounded a tree and pounced. Odette avoided her first attempt. Xena used her tussle with the leaves to spring out and reach for Odette's legs. Odette jumped back in surprise, stumbling into a tree. Xena was on her feet as Odette switched direction. She blindly ran in the opposite direction.

"You're pretty agile for a *Princess*. But those ankles are mine. And they're about to be draped over my shoulders while I devour you." Xena pushed off a tree.

The sound of Odette's frantic breathing filled her ears. Yet, the glimpse she got of Odette as she spun around another tree was one of wild freedom. Her mused ponytail whipped around her, running backward so she could catch sight of Xena. Then, as she wheeled back around, her smile was ear to ear. Xena calmed her steps, listening for Odette's new pattern. Once she picked a new path, Xena charged.

Odette dove for a bush seconds before Xena could wrap her arms around her. She tumbled over the ground on the other side. Xena scooped up what she could grab and yanked. Odette shrieked as she grabbed at the tree in front of her.

"Face it, your strategy needs practice, *Princess*," Xena snickered as she flipped Odette up and over her shoulder. Odette kicked and thrashed, but her punches were weak. Xena almost contemplated letting her go. She could run more, both of them could. But she smacked Odette's exposed backside, one on each cheek for good measure. Odette's struggles faltered. Xena smirked to herself.

She smacked Odette's right cheek hard. The thwack bounced off all the trees around them. Then Xena kneaded her cheek tenderly. Odette's

head flopped down against the backside of Xena's shoulders. *Captured prey.* Xena slid her hand across the underside of Odette's cheeks, grazing her fingers across the back of her thighs and her sex. Odette squirmed. Legs kicked out into the air as Odette smacked her hands against Xena's back. Xena slapped her other cheek. A muffled moan floated into the air.

"Do you give in? Or should I keep going?" Xena chuckled.

"You never play fair," Odette whined.

"I never said our play would be fair." Xena juggled Odette up and off her shoulder before pinning her to the bark of a tree. Odette held onto her for support as Xena jerked her sweatpants and panties down her legs. Then, with a wicked look, Xena nodded at the tree branch above their heads. "Grab that."

Odette did as she was told with confusion painted all over her wide-eyed expression. Xena hoisted Odette's trapped legs up and over Xena's head like a cloak and draped her legs over her shoulders.

"I did warn you I was draping your dainty ankles over my shoulders." Xena pressed hard kisses to Odette's inner thigh. Odette's arms trembled. Xena used one hand to steady Odette against the tree and one to tease her slick folds. Xena shivered as a chilly breeze ran down the back of her shirt.

Her fingers circled Odette's clit for a moment before traveling down and circling her entrance. Xena nursed a hickey onto Odette's other thigh. Odette rocked against her hand as Xena slowed her teasing fingers. She bit further down Odette's thigh until bruises speckled her flesh. When her mouth found its way to Odette's wet lips, Xena buried two fingers deep within her. Curling them, she pressed into Odette's sweet spot. Odette bucked against her mouth. Xena let her hips rock and roll against her as she found a steady rhythm on Odette's clit. Odette gripped the branch with all her strength. Head tossed back, she chanted Xena's name until her orgasm rolled through her body. Her legs trembling around Xena's head, she snapped them closed around Xena's skull. Xena grinned against Odette's soaked sex. She kissed and nuzzled her face into Odette's hips as Odette descended off her high. Xena caught the first puff of air leave her mouth as the temperature dropped.

Odette turned to putty as Xena eventually contorted her enough to bring her to the ground. She flopped back against the tree as Xena wiggled

her pants back up on her hips. Xena moved to scoop her up. Odette stopped her by putting two feather-light palms against Xena's chest.

"We're not done here." Odette grabbed the front of Xena's pants.

"We are done *out* here." Xena scooped up her hands. "It's going to drop into the negatives tonight. If we're out here too late, you'll catch frostbite and I'll be going to work with the sniffles."

"Why would I get frostbite?" Odette pouted.

"Because your panties are soaked," Xena lifted Odette's knuckles to her lips. She caught the blush burning on Odette's face in the fading shadows of the night as it descended.

Xena led Odette through the trees as the night cooled rapidly around them. Xena knew better than to try and tough the cold in these trees. They turned deadly fast in the middle of winter. She contemplated tossing Odette over her shoulder for fun. Then Odette curled up around her arm for warmth as they traveled out of the trees into the moonlight. She clutched Xena's arm desperately.

"Don't worry, *Princess*, we can warm those toes here shortly."

Odette said nothing but mumbled incoherent sounds under her breath. Xena led her through the grass and fields up to the house. The lights were on, but only in the kitchen and on Dinah's side. As she pulled the door open, Xena felt the warmth of a fire in the large hearth roaring across the home. Rufus lay in the middle of the fire, pouting. Then he saw Odette step inside and bound across the floor. Odette rushed to stomp out the red coals of fire that flung out with him.

Xena waited long enough for Odette to settle the flames and dust off Rufus before snatching her by the waist. Odette jerked in surprise, but Xena had her firmly in her arms. Rufus charged after them, staying on her heels. Climbing the stairs was difficult with a squirming Fae and confused hellhound. Then Xena dropped Odette inside the door. Rufus squeezed in seconds prior to Xena closing the door. But Xena was on a mission. No hellhound would get between her and Odette in her bed.

Apparently, Odette had the same intention as she shoved Xena into the door. She captured Xena's mouth while sloppily drawing something in chalk on the door. A hazy pink charm covered the door. Xena's hands pulled and tugged at the fabric on Odette until all of it either fell off or was removed. Odette strategically removed Xena's clothes to not break the kiss often. Until Xena could not wait longer. She pulled Odette up in one

arm and shoved Rufus off the top of the bed with the other. Odette barely had time to scramble up to the pillows before Xena kissed her hard again.

Xena froze as Odette's hands slithered under hers. Tangling their fingers together, Odette pulled Xena's hands up and above their heads. Using her elbows for support, Xena lowered herself till their stomach touched when she inhaled. Odette tugged on her lower lip. Xena broke the kiss first. Hovering over her, breathing her air, Xena studied Odette's face.

"Now, where was I?" Odette murmured before detangling her hands from Xena's. "Stay put."

Xena watched her slide down till her lips ghosted over Xena's collar bone. Xena's biceps trembled as she forced herself not to wrench backward. She bit her lower lip and held her breath. Telling herself she would not let her sensitivity ruin the moment. Then Odette placed a firm kiss to her collar. Xena exhaled a shaky breath as Odette did not tease or tickle her skin. Instead, nuzzled her face firmly against her chest. Odette's hands firmly kneaded into the side of Xena's hips. She followed Xena's pelvic bone with steady pressure.

"I keep forgetting," Xena confessed.

"Hm?" Odette hummed as she kissed the center of Xena's chest, between her breasts.

"That you are considerate." Xena lay her forehead down against her fists that balled up in the pillows.

"You're always considerate of me." Odette worked steadily down Xena's breast toward her nipple.

Instead of the uneasy tension that built up in Xena's stomach, it was anticipation. Xena let herself breathe as Odette sank back into the mattress and kissed Xena's breast. Her hands found their way between Xena's thighs. She buried her knees into the mattress as Odette cupped her sex. She put two fingers to Xena's clit and circled it firmly. Xena reminded herself to stay balanced. If she dropped in pleasure, she would crush Odette. Her biceps burned and her core ached. But as Odette nursed her clit and kissed along Xena's chest, Xena found herself unable to hold herself up. Xena realized her slip when Odette pawed at her side and scurried up.

"Sorry." Xena tried to push back up, but Odette only pushed at her until Xena relented and flipped. Then Odette went right back to where she

was previously. Xena enjoyed this far more as she relaxed back on her mattress.

She didn't even realize Odette brought her close to orgasm until her toes curled. Xena choked on her own tongue and air as her orgasm snuck up and smacked her like a wet towel. Her body clenched uptight. She wrapped her arms around Odette and hugged her close. When her body stopped convulsing, she released Odette. Odette lingered, still and warm, in her arms. Laying happy and smugly on Xena's chest, she folded her hands under her chest. Xena ran lazy fingers down her back.

"I didn't mean to crush you."

"You didn't. I could have used magic, but I figured this would be less strain on you," Odette shrugged. "That was to make up for my mischievous hands earlier. I can behave, I just forget to do so often."

Xena pulled Odette closer. Curling around her onto her side, Xena pressed sloppy kisses to Odette's lips and cheeks. Odette flopped one arm over Xena's side and put one under the pillow. Xena's fingers continued their slow trace up and down Odette's spine. "You don't have to tell me. I know you're good at following rules. I can't get you to break protocol at work even if it would be cool."

Odette broke into a fit of laughter. It filled the air like bells. Xena stared at the woman in her arms and knew in that moment that she was desperately, devastatingly in love with her. And she hoped beyond hope that Odette felt the same about her. She had to hope. Because that happy woman snuggling into her arms with her hellhound at the base of the bed, had the power to rip out her heart. She wouldn't even have to use magic.



Odette awoke to the shrill ringtone of her Crystalpad. She scrambled to return it to her hands in the comforts of Xena's pillows and blankets. Sleep nearly blinded her as she fumbled about the comforter and the warmth of a snoozing Rufus. Finally able to free her hands and her crystal pad, she set the crystal pad up and accepted the call. The clear image of her sister Aurora on the inside of her apartment filled her screen.

"Uh, good morning, Odette. Where are you?" Aurora propped the phone up on her kitchen counter and moved toward Odette's fridge.

Odette shifted to sit up on her elbow in Xena's bed. Sunlight warmed her back through the massive windows. Rufus stretched out on the comforter in front of her. Odette scanned the bed but found herself alone in the bed again. Somehow, she ended up waking up in Xena's bed the last three nights. She hadn't meant to stay over more than one time. But after going to work the day after, she was too exhausted to collect her car, then Rufus, and then drive all the way back to the apartment or even to her brother's. Then the next night, Xena needed groceries and by the time Odette and she got to the farm, she wanted to cook. They ate a full meal and took Rufus on a long walk through out the farm. By the time they returned Odette forgot she owned a separate dwelling.

However, as she watched her sibling riffle through what snacks she did own in her fridge, she remembered it all too well.

"Why are you in my apartment?" Odette stifled a yawn.

"Well, as I recall, we had plans today as it was your day off." Aurora closed the fridge with her foot. "But you're not in your apartment."

"Yes, we had plans for lunch." Odette flopped back against the pillows. She cursed to herself as she recalled that she had, in fact, made plans with her sister last week that she would take her to lunch. She had wanted to talk about the Clara incident. Then she fell asleep curled up in between Xena's firm back and Rufus' fluffy side.

"Are you in Xena's bed?" Aurora asked through a mouth full of yogurt.

"Yes," Odette groaned. She rubbed her face. "And I need you to come get me. My car is still at the apartment."

"And how long have you been in Xena's bed?"

Odette snapped her attention to Aurora who smugly hid behind the yogurt container. At first, she wasn't even going to acknowledge the question. But then her sister pointed at the yogurt. She twisted it to show Odette the date on it. Odette groaned, "Please don't tell me it's expired."

"It's not like you to let things expire. So, you haven't been eating your own food. Plus, your toothbrush is gone."

"You looked in my bathroom?" Odette flipped the cover off her body.

"I'm nosey, sue me." Aurora tossed the empty container into the trash and stashed the spoon in the sink.

"You better wash that." Odette scrambled out of the bed and crawled over Rufus. He raised his head lazily but then flopped back.

"Why? You afraid it'll sit in the sink unwashed for a while?"

“It might if I know my prying sister is breaking into my apartment and stealing my food. Ungrateful thief.” Odette dug through her to-go bag and found new clothes to pull on. As she fumbled with closing the bedroom door and getting herself put together, she noticed the open bathroom. Her toothbrush sitting in the cup next to Xena’s. Odette even had her deodorant and perfume on the bathroom counter. She glanced over her shoulder at her crystal pad. In the three nights, she’d stayed the night, she didn’t even fight to go home. As if she felt comfier inconveniencing Xena than returning home. She didn’t want to suck it up and force herself to return. The empty apartment was a hollow reminder of Clara and her failed engagement.

Yet, knowing Xena as well as Odette knew her, if Xena didn’t like the situation, she would say something. She invited Odette over. She offered to drive them to and from work. She didn’t bring up how long Odette had stayed. Only Odette apologized for staying another night. Odette stared at the space where Xena slept the night before. The imprint of her head lingered in the formation of her pillow. Xena’s watch and cell phone missing from the side table.

She left in her truck, knowing Odette didn’t have her car.

“She didn’t expect me to leave,” Odette exhaled.

“What?” Aurora chirped from the screen of the crystal pad.

“Xena, she doesn’t expect me to go back.” Odette stepped up to the bed. She took up her crystal pad. “I’ll text you the address. I’ve got to shower.”

“Should I bring your car? That way you can drive home when we’re done?”

Odette glanced at Rufus. He stared up at her from the comforts of the bed. She should pack him and all her stuff up and go home. She was off today. She could take her sister to lunch and then go home. She should *go home*. They were just co-workers. They were both Vice Presidents. They worked together and sometimes slept together. *More often than not, they slept together*. Were they more than that? Did this make them more than that?

“I can see the smoke pluming out of your ears from here. What’s going on in that skull of yours?” Aurora pulled her face close to the screen as if she were peeking through a keyhole.

“Yeah, you should bring it. Because I should go home.”

“Do you want me to bring it?”

“Of course, it’s my car and Rufus hates your convertible.”

“Do. you. *Want*. Me to bring. The. Car!” Aurora snapped every syllable as she throttled the phone.

Odette bit her tongue. Aurora smirked. She hung up the call and left Odette spiraling in silence. Even Rufus stared at the screen in question. Odette found the strength to text her sister the address. Yet she stared at the text box. She contemplated texting Xena. She could flat out ask her if she meant for Odette to stay. If that’s something she wanted... they hadn’t even discussed it. Odette wouldn’t even know how to start that conversation. The air grew tense as Odette’s hands fiddled with her pajamas. Only the creaking of steps behind her awoke her from her trance. Odette twisted to see Dinah poking his head through the cracked door.

“Don’t mind me, just here for the hound. I’ve got a few fat chickens who need chasing.” Dinah nodded his chin at Rufus. Gleefully, the hellhound bound off the bed and through the doorway. Rufus dove in between Dinah’s legs and down the steps.

“Thank you, again, for being so accepting of Rufus. He’s a good boy, but a lot of people see a hellhound and immediately think he’s dangerous and unreasonable.” Odette hugged herself.

“You’re preaching to the choir there, little witch. I’ve got a farm full of so called dangerous and unreasonable.” Dinah cracked his lips into a wide smile. “Did my daughter happen to feed you before she scampered off to work?”

Odette broke into giggles as she shook her head. “No, she didn’t, but she needed to get in early today. We had an event in sales planned for today.”

“Well, I can throw some biscuits in the oven for you?” Dinah cocked his head against the door.

Odette finally let herself see Dinah truly as he stood in front of her. Dinah was handsome, a strong jawline covered in a well-groomed beard, sharp cheekbones, and obsidian eyes. His thick eyebrows were the only hair above his beard as he obviously shaved his head. Tattoos ran the length of his head down his neck and along his arms. Xena and he shared the same steel-colored skin and broad shoulders, muscles abound and slouched posture. Odette liked the mix of full Goliath Xena inherited from her father, but the mystery of her mother lingered. Xena’s amber eyes

glowed and blond hair like gold in the sunset. Odette blinked as she realized she had been staring. Laughing nervously, she ducked her head and shuffled toward the bathroom.

“Thank you, truly, but my sister is on her way to collect me. I promised I would go to lunch with her today.” Odette hesitated in the doorway to the bathroom. Then she swiveled around to face Dinah again. “Did Xena ever mention my staying here?”

Dinah’s eyebrows shot upon his head as he shook his head. “She didn’t mention it to me.”

“Oh.” Odette felt her lungs deflate as she sank back against the bathroom door.

“But don’t take that the wrong way. My daughter’s headstrong, just like her old man. And, well, her mom was too. We’re all stubborn bulls, and if she decided you were going to stay, she wouldn’t ask me for permission.” Dinah stepped into the room more, leaning against the open frame. He faced Odette. Crossing his arms against his chest, he slouched backward. *They even slouched the exact same.*

“But it’s your house.” Odette furrowed her brows.

“Actually, it’s hers,” Dinah shrugged.

“How? I thought it was a family home?” Odette gawked.

“Well, after Xena’s mom died, I made a few financial bad choices. Xena made the good ones. And she bought the house and land from the bank. So technically, it’s her house. But she’ll never admit to that because she never wanted me to feel bad. She also pays all the bills. She definitely won’t tell you. So, as I said, if she wanted you to stay, she wouldn’t ask my permission. She doesn’t have to.” Dinah scratched at his beard absentmindedly. He ruffled it before flattening it back against his face. Odette lingered in silence as she let everything download. He watched her for a long moment before he snapped his arms out. Cracking everything from his shoulders to his wrists, he groaned with relief. The sound of his snapped joints filled the room at an upsetting volume. Then he rolled his shoulders and head to crack his neck. “Look, I think you’re worried a lot about what you and her are, when you haven’t fully processed who you were.”

“This all just happened so fast,” Odette squeaked. Her hands trembled as she stuffed them deep into her armpits.

“Did it?” Dinah chuckled. “According to my records, you two have been flirting for years now.”

“I *wasn’t* flirting!” Odette barked. Then her whole body froze as horror and embarrassment flooded her. Cheeks burnt to a crisp with a blush and hands tangled up in her shirt, she tried to swallow her tongue. Odette tried to move but found herself cemented to the ground. She found control of her limbs and rubbed her palms against her face. “I was in a very committed relationship for years, then I suddenly lost that and immediately jumped into her bed. I would say that happened fast.”

Dinah bounced his head from side to side. As if he debated the pros and cons of what Odette said, he shrugged again. “Well, is it the speed that worries you or some made-up ethical code of what is right and wrong? What do you want?”

“I don’t know.” Odette’s voice broke as she stared at Dinah. Tears formed that she hadn’t known were hiding. Yet Dinah seemed to know.

Dinah pushed off the doorframe and swiftly swarmed Odette in a hug. She gasped for air as the tears flooded her cheeks like waves in the ocean. Clutching onto Dinah’s back, she inhaled wood smoke and chicken feed along with the laundry detergent on his shirt. His arms were warm and surrounded her but did not squeeze. Odette squeezed first as she sobbed into his shoulder.

He ran his hand down her hair and back, petting her kindly. Then he squeezed her once before letting go. By the time he released her, all the tears stopped. Odette dried the leftovers against her cheek with the back of her hand. Dinah knelt in front of her, cupping her shoulders tenderly.

“I don’t know what I want, and I’ve been asked that a lot recently,” Odette murmured. “I don’t think I have some profound reason why, but it feels like for so long I didn’t get what I wanted, or I sacrificed it for what she wanted, or what was best for my family or the company. I want to be selfish for once but what if that’s not what she wants.”

“If she didn’t want it, we both know she would have said something. I can never get that child to shut up.” Dinah cracked a smile, which only brought a smile to Odette’s lips. He patted her shoulders softly. Then he lumbered to his feet. “For what it’s worth, you’re the first woman that Xena’s ever brought home. I wish Marnie would have been here for this. She always was a lot more poetic than I was. It’s probably why my daughter’s so crass.”

Odette choked on her own saliva as Dinah winked. Then he sauntered out the doorway and down the stairs. Odette lingered in the same spot he hugged her. Chickens crowing in the front in tandem with the howls of werewolves and a hellhound enjoying themselves filled the air around her. It wasn't loud or crowded like the academy. It wasn't hollow and cold like her apartment. Nor was it chaotic and stressful like K&M. Xena's house radiated with a softness that comforted Odette. But it wasn't her home. *At least not yet.* Despite Dinah's words, Odette knew she'd always feel pressure in some way as it was where she was living. If she wanted to do this, and do it honestly, she couldn't repeat the mistakes of her past.

No more moving in without thinking it through. No more proposing without feeling completely stable in the relationship. No more wondering how someone felt.

She finally made herself shower and dress. Seconds after showering, washing her hair, and dressing in a t-shirt and jeans, crunching tires over gravel sounded from outside. Odette clambered to the bedroom window to spot her car below. Aurora slid out of the driver's side only to be tackled by an overly excited Rufus. Aurora shrieked with joy as she hugged the massive hellhound.

Odette barreled down the steps in the house, rounded the empty kitchen, and bound outside. Bouncing her way into her flats, she came around the corner. Aurora ran in circles away from Rufus who stayed hot on her trail. Odette scanned for Dinah. All the barns were open, and the animals were out in their yards, but no sign of Dinah.

"Rufus, come," Odette commanded. Rufus perked up and bound toward her. Odette snapped his harness out of her pocket dimension and into her hand. He stepped into the harness after she offered it. Then he watched Aurora as she walked up toward them.

"Wow, did you see that one?" Aurora pointed at Jeremy, the werewolf. He lumbered in his yard with a new friend. A younger werewolf that Dinah saved earlier in the week. They hadn't named the werewolf yet. A gray wolf with icy tips of hair and mighty paws. Xena mentioned how the werewolf was likely a baby.

"Yeah, the big brown one is Jeremy, the gray one doesn't have a name yet." Odette put out her hand. Aurora dropped the keys in her palm while devouring the farm in all its wildness. Mouth open, gawking in sheer awe, Aurora stepped toward the fence.

“Ah, this must be the sister!”

Odette glanced behind her to see Dinah leaving the back of the house with a stack of lumber on his shoulder. West, the stable boy, hobbled behind him with all the tools in his hands. Dinah dropped the lumber, rumbling the earth around them. West nearly toppled over. Aurora stared up at Dinah with wide eyes and an open mouth. Then she glanced at Odette in disbelief.

“Dinah, this is one of my sisters, Aurora. Aurora, this is Dinah. Xena’s dad. And that’s West, he works for him.”

“Hi!” West waved frantically despite the tools in hand.

“You’re massive,” Aurora blurted out.

Odette slapped the backside of her sister’s head. “Aurora!”

“What?” Aurora hissed as she whipped around to her sister.

“Well, to be fair, you’re both very short,” Dinah snorted. He took up the lumber again and set it on his shoulder. “You two have fun. I’m going to put this child to work. We’ve got another hut to make with our newest addition to the funny farm.”

Odette linked arms with her sister and dragged her back toward her car. Gravel stabbed into the bottoms of her flats. Aurora avoided chickens that clucked and dove for them. Rufus eventually lunged at one of them. Odette didn’t correct him. She let him bark and bounce at the chickens until they reached her car. Then he clambered into the backseat as if he had not been living wild on a farm for three days.

Sat in the car, she stared across the gravel toward the fields. Dinah and West set up a station to work. Animals lumbered across the grass while the trees danced in the gentle breeze. Odette watched the branches against the blue sky. The memory of Xena kissing her against the tree at the edge of the forest returned to her mind.

“I can’t go back.” Odette flipped the car into reverse and backed down to the gravel road.

“Here?” Aurora pulled her seatbelt on.

“No, to the apartment.” Odette glanced at her sister. Odette pulled out from the gravel road to the main asphalt. Her car hummed in appreciation as she floored it away from the farm. “I don’t know if I’m staying here. I don’t think I should. Not right now. I have to ask Xena. I’m afraid to even ask. Even though he said she wouldn’t ask, I still need to hear her say it. But one thing is for sure, I can’t spend another night in that apartment. So,

after lunch, for eating my food, me and you are going back to the apartment and packing my clothes completely.”

“Well, why don’t you just spend half your time with me?” Aurora situated herself down in the seat to prop her feet up. “That way you can still figure stuff out but don’t feel like you’re being love-bombed or confused. Like live with me during the week and crash at the farm on the weekend?”

Odette glanced at her sister, “Aren’t you living at the academy right now?”

“Technically yeah, but I have a whole three-bedroom apartment on the other side of King’s Fall. I just don’t like living there by myself because it’s always too quiet. And you know I hate cooking. Living on your own is all cooking. And that means I have to grocery shop for myself. I hate shopping for myself, nor do I know how to portion right. Plus, the academy has more energy, it gives me the inspiration to paint. So, I don’t actually use the first thing I bought with my adult money. Other than like my car.” Aurora shrugged, poking at the screen of her phone.

“How did I not know you had a place?” Odette slowed down at a stoplight. She stared at her sister.

“Well, when I bought it, you’d just proposed to Clara. Plus, nothing’s unpacked the only thing I have is the coffee maker and my bed set up. But if you moved in, I’d use it more. Plus, I know Giselle needs a place. So, I was going to suggest maybe, we could, I don’t know, live together again. Like when we were kids.” Aurora glanced up from her phone and pointed through the windshield. “Greenlight.”

“Right.” Odette floored it through the empty intersection. Then she smiled, “Actually, that might be exactly what I need.”

Aurora’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? And it’ll be like old times, and like I have my sister’s back! Plus, this way, when you and Xena do eventually admit to being in love with each other, then it’ll feel real and honest instead of pressure, right? Plus, I can walk Rufus all the time when I need a break or some time to think about what to paint. Giselle also just got out of school, so she’ll-”

Aurora picked a radio station as she rambled, but Odette didn’t hear a word of it. She could only hear the thoughts swarming in her head. *Being in love?* Was she ready to admit that she was in love yet? She needed to ask Xena. She wanted Xena to ask her. But she was used to being

the one to ask the other person in the relationship. She said she would stop wondering what someone else felt. So, it was time to put her money where her mouth was! She needed an answer.

Odette hadn't realized they flew into town until Rufus barked from the backseat. Her attention flipped to Mumford's. She slammed on the breaks, pissing off the person behind her. Then she ripped them down the alleyway toward the pub.

"Ooh! I heard about this place! They have a Fae kitchen staff floating in the rafters." Aurora bounced in her seat.

"Their wings are extra crunchy and spicy." Odette pulled into one of the many open spots along the sidewalk. The open sign on the door assured her they weren't too early. Likely, no one was eating at a pub in the middle of the week an hour before regular lunch hours.

Mumford's from the outside looked every part of the wooden pub on the outside. The stained-glass windows glistened in the sunlight. The wooden tables on the patio reminded her of Xena. Odette climbed out of her car smiling up at it. The front doors opened to the backside of a Katto man sweeping dust out the front door. Odette let Rufus out of the back seat and locked her car. As the employee spun around, he stopped like he was slapped.

"Are we too early?" Aurora and Odette panicked at the same time.

"No, no! Of course not! We're open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner." He waved his hand. "But you must be Odette."

"How does everyone know you?" Aurora hissed under her breath.

"Was it Rufus who gave me away?" Odette sheepishly walked toward the patio.

"Ah, come on in. It's early, no one's gonna be upset about the pup." The man waved them toward the front door. "The names Minx. I'm the owner of this fine establishment. I believe you and I have a mutual frenemy."

"Xena," Odette laughed.

"One and the same." Minx held the door open for the two of them. "And who is this?"

"My sister, Aurora." Odette nudged her sister who was too busy staring at the whole restaurant to say hello. Aurora spun and jutted out a hand in Minx's direction. He shook it, then offered a hand to Odette. She shook his fuzzy palm and smiled at how unusually coarse it was underneath. Like

he'd worked with his hands his whole life but constantly washed and took care of them at the same time.

"So not the crazy girl who yelled at you from the sidewalk?" Minx eyed Odette.

Odette chuckled, shaking her head. "No, not my ex."

"Good, because Xena's already made it known that she's not welcome at Mumford's. And what she says goes." Minx motioned at one of the large, round tables throughout the pub. "Raw steak for the pup and a frosty apple ale. A basket of firecracker wings. And for the sister?"

"I will take exactly what she's having. Firecracker sounds fantastic." Aurora bound into her seat with childish glee.

"Iron gullets you two, I see. No problem, Rose' still your drink of choice?" Minx headed for the bar.

"A whole bottle, if you don't mind." Odette put her card out, "You can go ahead and start a tab if you need."

Minx shook his head. "No can do."

"Don't tell me." Odette rolled her eyes as she sat down in her own chair. "That's three times now I haven't been allowed to pay."

"Xena's rules." Minx tossed his paws up in the air with a mischievous grin.

"What? Does she own this place too?" Odette scoffed, crossing her arms under her chest.

"Well, she was the first investor in Mumford's when we were both knights. I paid her back triple before we even made it out of the program." Minx slid behind the bar and pulled out two glasses and one frosty mug. Rufus clambered up into his own chair, watching Minx with intense patience.

Odette glanced at her sister, then she too, looked around the inside of the pub. Wall to wall cherry wood walls and floor with an intricate carving. Vaulted ceiling with a full-service kitchen working already on their order. The massive chandelier swung with a light breeze. Behind the bar, a chalkboard sat in the center of shelves and shelves of bottles. Minx was the only one working the bar, but there was no one else in Mumford's. Odette snapped the frisbee out of her pocket dimension and placed it down in front of Rufus.

Minx carried the two glasses with one paw and the mug in the other, looping a whole bottle with the tip of his tail. He set the glasses down

before sliding Rufus the mug. Rufus stared at Odette. She picked it up and set it on top of the frisbee. Rufus slammed his snoot into the liquid and lapped it up aggressively. Minx set the bottle onto the table.

“You’d think drinking chicken blood would lessen his thirst.” Odette shook her head.

“Drinking what now?” Aurora huffed.

“He ate a rooster.” Odette motioned at him. “And Xena and Dinah thought it was hilarious. I nearly had a heart attack.”

“That sounds like Xena.” Minx pulled out the chair opposite the table and sat in it backward. “Then again, did she ever tell you the time I dared her a good chunk of change to eat an entire raw liver?”

“Ew.” Aurora audibly gagged as she washed it down with rose’.

“Ate every last bite,” Minx snickered. “So, blood and guts have never scared her.”

“Well, to be fair, Aurora, you remember when Charming tried teleportation for the first time and got himself caught. Mangled his leg up pretty bad.” Odette took up her glass.

“Oh yeah, and we had to patch him up before mom found out,” Aurora laughed sheepishly.

“Because we weren’t supposed to be doing that kind of magic without adult supervision.” Odette grimaced. “We did a lot without adult supervision.”

“Well, mom and dad were always busy. Oooh! Wings!” Aurora bounced in her seat again as the wing baskets floated down over their heads. Aurora took her basket and brought it to her nose.

Odette took her basket and set the plate of raw steak down next to the frisbee. Rufus didn’t notice it until the mug was fully drained. Then Odette swapped the two items. Minx stared at the empty mug in complete admiration. Aurora swayed happily as she bit into her first wing. Then she moaned loudly and pointed at the wing aggressively.

“Good, aren’t they.” Odette took up her own wing.

“This is my new favorite wing spot. These are better than mom’s death sauce wings.” Aurora licked her fingers clean.

“The kitchen appreciates the high praise.” Minx waved up into the rafters. Two Fae women watched with gleeful expressions. Aurora and Odette gave them thumbs up. The two women strutted back into the floating kitchen with their heads held high.

“Your parents work-a-holic’s too?” Minx asked with his head tilted to the side.

“Well, Dad’s the head of the academy, mom’s the head healer. And there are always so many kids. There were seven of us. So, we were always together. Plus, the other staff was there. But you know, kids of the staff always have more fun, you know?” Aurora babbled as she smacked over another wing.

Odette sat halfway through her first wing. Her stare lingered on the space between Rufus and Aurora. *Aurora was right*. They were always unsupervised because there were seven of them. They watched each other. Odette glanced up from the table to Aurora. She beamed back at her sister as she tried not to get sauce all over the wine glass.

Her siblings always watched out for each other. No matter Aurora’s mistake with Clara, it was rooted in looking out for her sister. Aurora was wounded to see Odette wounded. It had been so long since she felt the overpowering love from her siblings. Clara had robbed her of that. Odette took up her glass and clinked it against Aurora’s. “And now that we’re getting the band back together, I’m sure there will be more shenanigans to follow.”

“I love shenanigans with the band,” Aurora winked.

Chapter Fifteen:

“It couldn’t possibly be Knight&Mage Inc if it wasn’t an absolute chaotic mess *every. Five. Seconds.*” Xena rested her forehead on her palms. Irritation made her left eye twitch. She closed her eyes. Her fingers dug into her hair and raked it back behind her. Flopping back in her seat, she tossed her head back against the plush leather. The sound of mild panic filled the office from down below.

Daphne and Chatterbee had been arrested, and the investigation ended. *Or so they thought.* One scandal was manipulated out of the limelight and forced into someone else’s hands. Except a news article dropped. Their reporter they invited to come inside? The whole tour, taking pictures, all of it was for not. Maybe it was her fault for not demanding the reporter be vetted or investigated. Maybe it was public relation’s fault for not seeing the obvious ties. As the reporter was a cousin of Daphne’s and dropped a massive hit piece, demanding a boycott of the sale.

“I apologize, had I been more proactive on social media, I could have seen this coming.” Alistair sank into his chair on the opposite side of Xena’s desk.

“That’s not your job.” Xena dropped her hands into her lap. Staring up into the ceiling, she contemplated the repercussions of the whole situation. On one hand, they handled the crowd of people shouting outside well. Security didn’t even have to warn anyone. They let them stand across the street and scream all they wanted. They were allowed to disagree with the company. The sale did phenomenally. Their sale of anti-magic armor took off because of the commotion. Not to mention the story Gilga told everyone of the rampaging Rhino that could not be stopped. Metrics alone said it was positive.

But on the other hand, there was a whole army of people outside the building handing out fliers. Mini clippings of the story for everyone to read. *The story of two star-crossed lovers who were so underpaid they turned to illegal magic siphoning.* Which, of course, spread like wildfire. There were petitions to release Daphne and Chatterbee all over the Crystalnet. People demanding K&M pay for a comfy life for them for the rest of their lives.

Xena's attention shifted from the ceiling to the open doorway of her office. Out on the work floor were about forty employees all talking. Employees and management, all stuck in the same discourse. Everyone had their opinions, and they voiced those opinions loudly.

"I should go down there and talk to them." Xena pushed up from the seat.

"Should I call Ms. Plum in?" Alistair squeaked as he climbed to his feet.

"No!" Xena whirled to face him. "I can handle this!"

Alistair paled as Xena stared through him like glass. Then she exhaled steadily out her nose. She poked her hands into her pockets and sat back on her heels. They only had Alistair for a week at this point. She could already hear Odette berating her for being mean.

"I apologize for overstepping. I just assumed, due to this issue being over raw magic." Alistair swallowed visibly as he tucked his hands behind his back.

"I appreciate the thought process, but I am capable of handling a PR incident."

The elevator dinged. For a moment, Xena felt her blood run cold. As if summoned from the sky, she imagined Odette stepping out of the elevator. But when she turned to stare through the glass of her office, she saw Sky stepping out with Xagu in tow. They were speaking animatedly with their hands as they bound out of the elevator. Then their attention shifted to Xena in the office doorway.

"Ah! Perfect! We caught up to you." Xagu beamed a wide, toothy grin. "Sky handled the nightmare down on the sidewalk."

"And Xagu got his new operation on social media which kind of helped my whole cause." Sky bumped knuckles with Xagu.

"That is fantastic news," Alistair wheezed from behind Xena.

"How in King's Fall did you manage to take care of that nightmare?" Xena stepped out into the hall.

"Well, I too know quite a few radical minds who have a voice and know how to move a protest." Sky wiggled their eyebrows with mischievous eyes. Then they pulled their phone out of their back pocket and showed a screen to Xena. "I called in the cavalry."

Xena stared at a group chat with multiple answers that continued to flood in. "Who is the cavalry?"

“All of my non-profit friends plus a Mr. Charming Plum and everyone he could muster.” Sky took back their phone and poked it in their back pocket.

Xena deflated as she sank back against the glass of her office. “You told Charming?”

“Was that the wrong thing to do? He’s led many protests through the streets of many cities. He redirected them to city hall and directed their intention against raw magic laws that put citizens behind bars every year for illegal use of a common... you don’t care.” Sky’s face faltered from concerned to blatant displeasure in Xena’s reaction.

“You told Mr. Plum about our problem.” Alistair grimaced as he pulled out his phone. He began to call someone. Xena had one good guess who it was.

“And likely he told Odette,” Xena grumbled to herself.

The elevator dinged a second time. Silver doors of the elevator sprung open as Odette charged out of the elevator with a red face and clenched knuckles.

“Speak of the witch.” Xena planted her palms on her hips. “I have everything under control!”

“Is that why my brother is storming the guardian building with about a hundred strangers talking about raw magic?” Odette tossed her arms out to the side. “Why wasn’t I informed of this the second it happened?”

Xena shot a glare at Alistair, who immediately closed his mouth. He stared away from both women, hanging up his call and tucking his phone away.

“I should direct you both to public relations so they can take over.” Alistair smiled sheepishly at Xagu and Sky. They both slid away from Odette and nearly bolted for the elevator. Alistair clambered inside the silver machine and spared Xena an apologetic look as the doors closed.

Xena had only a second to stand up straight before Odette snatched her arm and dragged her into the office. She closed the doors with a thunderous snap. Purple magic filled the glass like veins, pulsing as if it had its own heartbeat. Xena cocked her right brow up as she stared down at Odette. “Calm down, I had it under control.”

“This is what you call control?” Odette gestured at the building wildly. “A picket fence across the sidewalk that leads to a protest that originated from here? And the reporter! When did you find out she was Daphne’s

cousin? Why did our Department Heads deal with the situation without your consent? And here I was, packing up my apartment when I get a call from my brother-”

Xena’s arms fell to her side. “You were packing?”

“No! Don’t you *dare* try and change the subject!” Odette hissed, “This is serious! Do you know how this looks?”

“It looks like on your day off our department heads dealt with an issue without having to be told what to do and that looks like good leadership. They thought up a solution all on their own and felt empowered enough by my leadership to enact that solution without having to ask for permission.” Xena smirked as she crossed to her desk. She sat on her chair with her hands folded in her lap. Her attention dropped to the rumpled attire around Odette. She wore a t-shirt and jeans, even sported a pair of sneakers. *Not any t-shirt*. A K&M Knight program faded t-shirt that was tie-dyed.

“That’s not their job.” Odette stormed after Xena, hands on her hips.

“It’s also not ours, technically that’s what Public Relations is for,” Xena chuckled. “And if you want to get even more technical, it’s technically Ash’s job. Which she isn’t doing.”

“Why are you laughing! This is serious!” Odette cocked her hip out to the left.

“I just think it’s funny, for someone who clearly hated the Knight program, you have the merch.” Xena nodded at Odette’s chest.

Odette straightened up and glanced down at her shirt. She picked at it with her fingers. Then she snapped her eyes up to Xena. “Well, I needed a change of clothes after that muck monster flooded the office a year ago. It was all they had in my size.” Odette pouted.

“And you tie-dyed it?” Xena reached out and tenderly cupped her hands on Odette’s sides.

“Well, it was hideous otherwise.” Odette sat back on her heels.

Xena tugged Odette closer. Odette didn’t fight it. She looped her arms around Odette as she pulled her closer. “Now, about you packing?”

“I’m still very angry at you.” Odette narrowed her eyes into slits.

“It’s your day off. Is it such a crime to respect your space and relaxation? You never bother me on my day off,” Xena purred.

“I would rather you respect me by informing me so that I’m not told through the grapevine, or worse, *my brother*. If you had at least warned me ahead of time that this is what you were dealing with, I may have just

called and asked what our plan was. We're in this together, remember! We're both VP, so we both need to have a say in how we respond to situations like this." Odette's shoulders slouched as she planted her hands on Xena's thighs.

Xena hesitated to respond. Staring into Odette's blue eyes, reflecting hues of purple from the magic that filled the glass around them. She wanted to counter that wasn't her intention. But she couldn't stop the repetition of Odette's words at the back of her head. She was in the middle of packing. *Packing what?*

"So we're not enemies anymore?" Xena tilted her head to the side.

"No, we're still enemies. As long as you keep making gut, illogical decisions like this, we will continue to be enemies. I mean, what were you thinking? Not telling me!" Odette huffed, her cheeks reddening again.

"That you would stay in my bed, and I could see you when I got home," Xena confessed.

Odette froze, her mouth hung open. She blinked, defrosting inch by inch. Her attention fell to Xena's lap. Odette's fingers moved to her pockets, tracing the seams, and fiddling with the fabric. Her lip quivered, "I took my stuff back."

"What?" Xena dislodged one arm from behind Odette to lift her chin with her forefinger. "Was something wrong?"

"No." Odette shook her head.

"Then stay." Xena's mouth dried. Her chest grew heavy as she struggled to breathe.

"This weekend." Odette grabbed Xena's hand and squeezed it in her palm. "I'm going to live with my sisters. I think I need to reconnect with me first. I need to figure out me, first."

Xena swallowed her sandpaper tongue. Then Odette pulled Xena's knuckles to her lips and kissed them. She twisted her hand so she could cup Odette's face, watching her shiver. Xena's voice died in her throat. Scrambling for any words to make her stay. Then she watched Odette peer up at her and the words fell apart. Odette smiled.

"Whatever makes you happy." Xena squeezed the air from her lungs enough to make the words form.

"You make me happy." Odette pushed her way into Xena's lap and draped her other arm around Xena's shoulders. "Spending nights at the farm with the werewolves and bickering with you about my dog eating

stupid chickens and kissing you against trees, I want that. I want to go on dates to Mumford's with you and I want you to let me pay. I want to bring you home for dinner and I want my father to remember your name and face. I want you to kiss me in your dirty truck and talk about how sexy my thighs are in stockings. I want you to call me when things happen because you don't have to face them alone. I want you, Xena. But I don't want to ruin this because you're one of the few people who make me happy, truly happy. Without sacrificing what I want or what I deserve."

Xena choked on her own tongue as Odette put her other hand against her bicep. Her smile never wavered. Tears filled her waterline but didn't spill. Xena licked her dry lips with her even drier tongue. Then tugged weekly on Odette's hips. "I want all of that too."

"What do you want specifically? You have to tell me." Odette scanned over Xena's face.

Xena moved both her hands to cup Odette's face. Her heart pounded against her rib cage like an angry bird. "I want you." Xena's voice cracked as she ran her thumbs affectionately over Odette's cheeks. "I want you to come to dinner with me somewhere you have to wear that dress again. I want to chase you on the farm just to hear your nervous giggles as you try to outrun me. I want to bicker with you over how to build new things on the farm, and in the office, and with your siblings. I want you to trust me with this job like you trust me with your heart and your happiness. And I want to call you my girlfriend. I want you to call me yours and not my enemy. Because you were never my enemy, I'm just stubborn and you're hot-headed."

Xena held her breath. Odette stared down at her with a mixture of emotions Xena couldn't decipher. Then Odette made it clear to her what she was feeling... because she kissed her with everything she had. Xena inhaled sharply through her nose. Floral scented soap and dusty paintings filled her nostrils. Odette whimpered into the kiss as she melted. Tears made their cheeks wet. Xena broke the kiss long enough to kiss away the tears on Odette's face.

Odette giggled, "Stop *flirting* with me."

Xena smirked, "I will *never* stop flirting with you, Princess."

Odette shivered, but when she opened those crystal blue eyes, they were full of affection and not lust. She failed to stifle the girlish smile that cracked on her lips. "I want you to keep calling me that."

Xena captured Odette's lips again and again until her lungs begged her to stop. Finally, she laid her head back against her chair. Odette lay her head down against her shoulder. Wrapping her arms tenderly around Odette, Xena snuggled her as close as possible. There was the tiny voice on her other shoulder begging her to ask Odette to stay. More than just a night, to stay at the farm always. But she knew that was the desperate voice of her heart wanting to lock Odette in place. Why wouldn't she want to always have access to her and to always know she was safe? That was the fear in her heart.

Knight's never let fear rule them. Knights fight through the fear and they conquer it for the betterment of their party, their company, and their life. And she was the best knight at Knight&Mage Inc.

The elevator dinged.

Odette sighed as she slid out of Xena's arms and up onto her feet. Xena sat back in her chair, unable to move from the warm spot she held Odette in. Then Odette broke the spell over their office doors and pulled the glass door open. Alistair slunk into view with a sheepish smile.

"So, on a scale of one to fired, how fired am I?" Alistair grimaced.

"Not fired." Odette waved him inside. "I apologize for my earlier outburst. You and Xena have this covered. I will see you tomorrow."

Odette glanced back at Xena with a warm smile before she slid out of the office. Xena watched her slip out of view. Then her attention slid to Alistair. He fidgeted in his own skin under her scrutiny.

Xena chuckled, "Relax, Alistair, you're not fired. And Odette and I talked it over. From now on, I'll tell her if something happens. Now, what happened in PR? What are they doing about the protestors?"



"What good is magic if it doesn't make a couch fit into an apartment door?" Aurora cocked her head to the right.

Odette wheezed with effort as she struggled to hoist the couch through the doorway. Giselle stood on the other side of the furniture, red in the face and dripping with sweat. Aurora panted for air as she shoved harder on the couch. With a pop, it shot through the door and continued through the house. Guided by magic, it floated in air until it landed in the living room. The three sisters broke into a fit of laughter as they fell to the side.

“Something’s magic can’t fix,” Odette panted.

“Maybe we should have asked Xena for help with the couch.” Giselle dried her face on her already drenched t-shirt.

“It’s just a couch.” Odette fumbled with her own legs.

“Yeah, a couch we struggled to get through a door.” Aurora crawled to the kitchen. The girls eventually climbed to their feet and collected water. Aurora sprawled along the frosty tile of their kitchen as Odette slunk back to her room.

An empty room with only her new mattress on the floor and all her clothes spewing out of bags. She left her glass cabinet full of herbs and potions in the living room to share between the three of them. Rufus slumbered on her bed, nesting in a pile of her comforter and pillow sleeves. He picked his head up lazily, his tongue dangling out the side. Odette ruffled his belly with her foot. Tossing back her water, she tried to wipe away the sweat with her free hand. She had her empty bedside table, her empty closet, and empty trunk to situate. Yet she didn’t feel a hollow feeling in her chest.

After an hour of moving clothes from the bags to hangers in her closet, she flopped back on her mattress. Rufus snuggled up against her. Burnt wood and farm hay wafted off his flaming hair. She burrowed her face in it and inhaled deeply. She had planned on returning to the farm this Friday night and spending most of the weekend there. The thought left her stomach twisted in knots.

Not moving in had been a good thing. She reminded herself of that every few hours until she began to believe it. She needed her space to figure herself out. She needed to get back to the family she isolated. She needed to heal the wounds she hadn’t realized she wore. Besides, Xena had said she could be incredibly patient.

The front door rumbled, and Rufus sprang over Odette to bark at it. Odette fumbled to her feet after him. As she stepped out into the living room, her lungs squeezed tight. Xena stood at the door in a sweaty t-shirt and gym shorts. Golden hair pulled up on her head with a ribbon to show off the grin plastered to her face. Xena held Rufus up off the floor like he weighed nothing. The dog in question froze like a fainting goat. Ruffling the top of his head, Xena put him back on his feet.

“What are you doing here?” Odette chuckled, leaning against her doorway. The apartment was an open floorplan with the three rooms at the

north, west, and southern walls. Odette picked the western wall, her room long and slender and facing the front door.

“You sent me the address. I figured that meant to come over.” Xena shrugged her gym bag off her shoulder and into her hand. She toed off her sneakers before sauntering to Odette. Within seconds, she pressed Odette into the door frame. Tossing her bag into Odette’s room, she scooped up Odette’s face in her hands. Xena stole every ounce of air out of Odette’s lungs with a sloppy, affectionate kiss.

A heavy, happy blush covered Odette’s cheeks as she clutched the front of Xena’s shirt. Clean deodorant and a hint of the office gym filled her nostrils. She pushed up into Xena’s kiss and touch. Hungry for more but embarrassed of the obvious stares from her sisters, clearly too awkward to walk out of the shared space, Odette broke the kiss.

“Um, Xena, this,” Odette trailed off breathlessly. She waved her hands vaguely in Aurora’s direction. “This is Aurora my slightly older sister, and that’s Giselle, my baby sister.”

Xena grinned as she pulled away from Odette. She stuck a hand toward Aurora. Aurora shook it vigorously. Then Xena twisted to Giselle who shook her hand softly. Both women stared up at Xena with shock and awe.

“Yes, she’s tall, we get it.” Odette rolled her eyes.

“I’m of average height. You’re short.” Xena turned back to Odette.

Odette slapped her bicep hard with a scoff, “I am average height too, thank you.”

“Did you want something to drink? We have water.” Giselle sheepishly shuffled toward the kitchen.

“Water would be nice, thanks.” Xena scooped an arm around Odette’s waist and pulled her close to her chest. “Looks like we’ve both been sweaty.”

“I’ve been moving an entire household, what’s your excuse,” Odette teased. She picked at Xena’s shirt with her nails to examine it.

“Training with Xagu and the other knights. Can’t let them think they can outbox me or let some sorceress think she can outrun me.” Xena beamed shamelessly as she used her free hand to cup Odette’s cheek. She rubbed the pad of her thumb against Odette’s cheek.

“Well, maybe you should fight someone more your level. It’s mean to pick on the new guy, he doesn’t know your weakness.” Odette watched as

Xena detached enough to thank Giselle for the water and take a large swig. “And I always let you win.”

Xena’s gaze bore directly into her with an intensity that turned Odette’s insides to mush. “Is that a challenge?”

“It definitely is.” Odette tugged Xena toward her room. “This Friday. Come to dinner with me.”

“Mmm, and why would I ever go to dinner with you.” Xena teasingly threw Odette’s words back in her face. Back in the day when they both sat in Ash’s old office and thought that only one would walk into work the next day. Maybe if she had taken Xena up on that offer, things would have been different. Or they would have ended right here, with Xena leaning Odette into the bare white wood of her new bedroom door.

Odette smiled up at her. “Because for once, I’m paying for my girlfriend’s dinner at our favorite place before I outrun her in the forest behind her place.”

Xena snatched Odette up by the waist and propped her up against her bedroom wall. Wrapping Odette’s legs around her firm waist, Xena melted into her touch. Odette plucked the hair tie out of Xena’s hair gingerly. All her golden hair fell so Odette could run her fingers through it. She scratched her nails lightly against Xena’s scalp. Xena lay her forehead against Odette’s. “This way we can be together when the official news releases that Ash is coming home from her company tour.”

“What?” Odette squawked, cupping Xena’s face. “She’s coming home?”

“End of next month. Our trial run is over, *Princess*, we’re staying VP and our president is coming home.” Xena stole a kiss before putting Odette back on the ground. “Samosa just snuck me the information this morning.”

Odette stared up at Xena as the information was downloaded. “We’re staying VP.”

“Now don’t get too confident, the work’s only begun,” Xena teased.

“Nothing we can’t face together.” Odette shrugged. “We faced a charging rhino and fake lovebird siphoning magic and my ex, whatever happens, we’ll face it together. Just don’t try and take all the glory. I did most of the work anyway.”

Odette squealed as Xena hoisted her up and tossed her onto the mattress. Xena bounced onto the mattress, probably alarming the

downstairs neighbors. Yet Odette only focused on the way Xena's hands tangled with hers. The radio playing from Aurora's room murmured through the walls... a company ad Odette had heard a million times...

Welcome to Knight&Mage Incorporated where we accomplish the impossible and dabble in the mystical.

The only place Xena and Odette worked to not kill each other long enough to... *be continued.*

About The Author

Lizzie Strong



Books are the one consistent thing in my life. Split between the high fantasy and war novels from my father and my mother's deep love for horror novels, it was only a matter of time. From a young age I would fill up notebooks and word documents. Adaptability came in handy as I've worked in many different fields: food service, retail, education, special education, management. I kept coming back to books. In college I fully came out to my friends and family about my Pansexuality. I believe representation is key, but I also want to write books about fantasy, adventure, love, and monsters. My work is best described as a little bit spooky, a little bit magic, and a whole lot of fun.

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